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"WHY SHOULD YOU DRESS? YOU LOOK WELL ENOUGH."

## HONOR BOUND;

Or, SEALED TO SECRECY.

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY.

CHAPTER I.

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

AN artist's studio; the walls covered with

half-finished pictures, some betraying the touch of still undeveloped talent, others scarcely more than daubs; a table littered with paint-stained rags and brushes; antique chairs, various in shape and size. The general effect of dingy apartments, being relieved in this case by large bouquets of violets and early primroses, that filled the old-fashioned blue china vases on the mantelpiece.

The artist, Cuthbert Grantley, was seated,



brush in hand, before his easel. He was a handsome man, about twenty-five years of age, with wavy auburn hair, worn rather long in true artistic style, regular features, and eyes of reddish brown. The outline of his tall, lithe figure showed to advantage in the black velvet coat he wore; his fair beard and mustache contrasted well with the purple silk handkerchief around his throat, knotted loosely in front under an open collar.

He was engaged in transferring to canvas the graceful form of a young girl, who knelt on a sort of dais at no great distance. Her oval face was almost faultless in beauty, both of feature and expression, though the ruby lips wore too proud a curve to suit those who consider humility and gentleness the highest attributes of female character. Her hair, of a peculiar shade of gold, almost approaching amber, was of immense length and luxuriance. On the present occasion, it hung loosely over her shoulders until its trailing tresses swept the ground. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes, with heavily fringed lids and penciled brows, glanced somewhat impatiently at Cuthbert, as he worked on with undiminished ardor, though the day was drawing to a close.

"Alma is growing tired; I am not surprised, poor child!" observed a middle-aged lady, seated on the faded lounge near the window, busy with some description of fancy needlework. "You are rather merciless, Cuthbert, in your devotion to art."

"I can work better when the whim is on me," returned he carelessly. "It is a pity to be disturbed when I am getting on with my picture. You do not mind remaining in that position a little longer, Alma?"

"No; oh, no," she answered, with an effort, for her knee ached, and her outstretched arm was stiff. "I am so anxious, Cuthbert, that this painting should be a masterpiece and find a ready purchaser, that I am willing to endure some amount of inconvenience. I will try to be a patient model."

"You are very kind to take so much trouble for my sake."

"Not for your sake, but for auntie's; every step that brings you nearer to fame and fortune is a gratification to her."

A frown contracted his brows as he painted on in silence, only broken by the click of his mother's knitting-needles and the pattering rain against the window.

"What a long, gloomy day this has been!" remarked Alma, with a sigh. "No gleam of sunshine, no break in the dull, gray clouds. It is positively as cold as winter, though the season is spring."

"Some days must be dark and dreary," quoted gentle Mrs. Grantley. "But I fear, dear Alma, after the varied occupations of

school life, and the society of so many young companions, you will find home rather dull occasionally, let the weather be what it may."

"How can you think so, dear Aunt Hester! I am delighted to be with you again, and enjoy the consciousness that Miss Prior's lectures can no longer carry trepidation to my soul, nor her Argus eyes flash displeasure at my peccadilloes. Besides, I am enjoying the novel sensation of being a grown-up young lady, whose education is finished, and who need no more take book in hand except for her own amusement."

"Yet with all this, Alma, you sometimes look pensive, and I have heard you heave deep sighs."

"You are too observant, auntie," said the girl, laughing. "If I sighed, it must have been because I cannot help missing my dear friend, Maud Clinton."

"Clinton!" repeated Mrs. Grantley, wondering. "Is she related to the Clintons of Eaglehurst, one of the oldest and most wealthy families in the county?"

"Oswald Clinton is her brother."

"You surprise me! I should have imagined a young lady with her pretensions would have been educated at home, or in a more fashionable seminary than St. Mary's."

"But poor Maud has no one to take much trouble concerning such matters. Her mother died when she was an infant, and she lost her father four years ago. Oswald is a grave, middle-aged man, twenty years older than his sister; from all accounts an eccentric being, devoted to solitude and abstruse studies. Then there is the grandmother, over four-score, and a great invalid; while, to complete my list, I must not omit to name Mrs. Lavinia Varley, who for years has held the situation of useful companion and confidential maid to the old lady, a sour-visaged, eminently disagreeable person, according to Maud's description. So now I have enumerated the chief members of the household, you will see there is no one likely to be over-fastidious regarding Miss Clinton's training or education."

"Your friend does not seem to have sketched her home circle in the most favorable light," remarked Mrs. Grantley, smiling.

Alma shrugged her shoulders.

"It was no use concealing the truth," she remarked; "and we had few secrets from each other. The poor girl was terribly dull after her father's death. She was his pet and favorite (for he seemed to have taken quite an aversion to his son, though I cannot say for what reason), and the two were continually riding, driving, or walking together. When he died, Oswald proposed to engage a governess for his sister, and would doubtless have selected the oldest and most grim of the species; but Maud



entreated to be sent to school, as she was pining for the society of other young persons."

"What will she do now?" asked Mrs. Grantley. "Eaglehurst will seem more dismal than ever."

"She hopes that in a short time a welcome change will take place," returned Alma, mysteriously, "and the old mansion, under new government, resume the festivities which distinguished it long ago."

"You mean, I suppose, that Oswald is going to get married?"

"Yes; and the lady is an heiress, young and beautiful. They were engaged some months before Mr. Clinton's death, so I wonder the wedding has been deferred so long. Perhaps, auntie, you have seen the bride-elect—Miss Marford, only daughter of the Hon. Edward Marford?"

Cuthbert looked up quickly from his work, a shade of interest on his generally impassive countenance. He, however, made no remark; but his mother said, "I know her quite well—at least, by sight. She often drives in this direction. A tall, stately girl, with dark hair and an aquiline nose. She is always dressed in the height of fashion. Cuthbert has often spoken of her pleasing manners and amiability."

"Is he acquainted with her?" inquired Alma, in some surprise, glancing at the silent artist.

"I scarcely remember whether I told you, love," answered the mother, "that Cuthbert, having been unsuccessful lately in selling his pictures, decided upon giving lessons in drawing and painting to such families as were willing to offer high terms for his services. Miss Marford is one of his most promising pupils."

It is almost needless to say that Mrs. Grantley was a devout believer in her son's genius, and only regretted to find her opinion unshared by mankind in general.

"Then you can give me every information concerning dear Maud's future sister-in-law," said Alma, playfully, turning toward the young man. "Is she lively or grave, witty or profound?"

"I am not in the habit of criticising young ladies," he replied, coldly. "And, Alma, you have moved entirely out of position. If you are not careful my picture will be spoilt."

"Oh, I am so sorry! Tell me what to do. I was so interested in talking about Oswald Clinton and Miss Marford, that I forgot to keep still."

"Never mind; the light is fading. I will release you, and put aside work for to-day."

Alma sprung lightly to her feet, rejoicing in this permission.

Mrs. Grantley deliberately folded up her work and consigned it to the depths of the capacious work-basket, which generally ac-

companied her on her journeys from room to room.

"I must see whether that stupid Betsy has brought up the tea-things," she remarked. "I dare say she is asleep in the kitchen instead of making the kettle boil, and has let the cake burn which I made this afternoon expressly on Cuthbert's account, he liked the last so well."

The young girl was about to follow Aunt Hester, and had already reached the threshold, when Cuthbert called her back.

"I want to speak to you, Alma," he said.

"You must not detain me long," she answered, "or auntie will be kept waiting. I am going to dress for tea."

"Why should you dress? You look well enough."

Well enough! She was radiant in loveliness as she stood before him in her flowing robes, fashioned according to the taste of a bygone century, her splendid hair vailing her figure; and greatest charm of all was her perfect unconsciousness of her own beauty.

"Alma, I cannot speak while you regard me with that mocking smile. Can you not give me your attention even for a few minutes?"

"Of course I will, cousin," she said, submissively, taking the seat he indicated; while he stood at no great distance, leaning on the mantelpiece and gazing into the dark eyes inquiringly raised to his own. "Do not be angry at my folly," she added, deprecatingly.

"I am not angry, dearest girl; I admire and love you far too well to be easily offended. Indeed, I was about to tell you that my hopes are centered in a future shared by you alone—that my affection—"

"Is that of a brother," she interrupted, hastily, half-frightened at his vehemence, and in her simplicity wondering whether these were expressions of mere cousinly tenderness, or that mysterious declaration of love which at school she had heard spoken of with bated breath by young ladies who prided themselves on having some experience in such matters.

"Not as a brother or cousin do I love you," he said, impressively, flattered by her agitation, which he imagined proceeded from a flutter of delight caused by his avowal. "Alma, you must be my wife."

"Oh, no!" she cried, guided by an instinct of repulsion that left no desire for reflection. "I could not marry you."

His brow darkened ominously.

"What, may I ask, is the reason for this decided refusal? We have known one another for years—nearly all our lives."

"Perhaps I know you too well," she murmured. Then, perceiving that her speech implied no compliment, she hastened to add, "I



mean that my friendship for you could never alter into love."

"Indeed, I cannot understand it," said he, gnawing his mustache meditatively. "Is it because you fancy you could make what young ladies call a better match? I confess I am not a rich man at present. But my paintings will sell well when I can succeed in hitting the popular taste, which scarcely appreciates high art, and this house is mine. If it were newly done up and furnished, we might reserve suitable rooms for our own use, and let the remainder at a high rental. My mother must find a home elsewhere. I always intended she should leave me when I married. Young couples are happier with no third person to come between them. So there would be her apartments, and—"

Alma interrupted him, quite pale with consternation.

"What! you would banish your mother from The Rosery, where her happy married life was passed—a place endeared to her by a thousand associations? Here she has often told me she was brought a bride; here she first embraced you, her son, and here she mourned over the loss of your father! Surely you will let her end her days in peace amidst the dear familiar scenes; it would be cruel to send her among strangers."

"We will waive the subject for the present," he said, somewhat abashed by her vehement protest; "but surely upon reflection you will accept my offer. Recollect, Alma, you are but a dependent on my mother's kindness, and at her death—"

"Enough, enough!" she cried, impulsively. "I always thought you cold and calculating; now I am convinced I did not judge you too severely. Forgive me, Cuthbert, but it is better to speak the truth."

She rose from her seat and ran out of the studio, already repenting she had said so much.

Cuthbert remained where she had left him, very pale, with a savage gleam in his eyes, betokening that he was offended beyond all hope of pardon. By-and-by he left off biting his mustache, and gave vent to a harsh, discordant laugh.

"Let her go," he muttered; "so much the better for me. My foolish fancy for her baby-face caused me to neglect my chance of winning an heiress. I believe Miss Marford might be easily gained if I set about courting her in earnest; and though her father might desire a more aristocratic son-in-law, a girl of spirit would not mind eluding his paternal vigilance by eloping with the man of her choice. From this hour I devote myself heart and soul to the furtherance of a project which, if successful, will gratify my ambition by bringing me wealth, consideration, and higher social posi-

tion. My dear Cousin Alma, it strikes me that I shall live to be grateful for your impertinent rejection."

Afterward, when the family were gathered round the tea-table, Mrs. Grantley dispensing the fragrant beverage, and lamenting that Betsy had fulfilled her prediction regarding the cake, Alma made several attempts to disperse the frowns that darkened Cuthbert's brow. Wrath rather than sorrow brooded in his heart. He studiously ignored her presence, and refused to offer the most simple civilities exacted by general custom. Poor Mrs. Grantley found her questions only provoked a snappish or sarcastic retort, so was fain to comfort her maternal soul with a timely remembrance that genius is apt to indulge in reveries which must not be lightly dispelled.

## CHAPTER II.

### AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THE weather grew more stormy as evening advanced. The rising wind moaned amidst the trees, and sent the pelting rain against the windows with a force which appeared to threaten destruction to the glass. But the sitting-room at The Rosery looked bright and cheerful, with its pretty cretonne-covered sofa and chairs, a piano, near which lay Alma's favorite songs, and a bookcase containing works by the most popular authors.

Mrs. Grantley and her son sat opposite each other by the glowing wood-fire, the latter bending over his book—not reading it however, for during a whole hour the page was still unturned—while between them Alma crouched upon the hearthrug, basking in the warmth, and making strange pictures in the fiery caves before her.

Mingling with the sounds of wind and rain, a woman's voice was heard outside the house, singing in loud, shrill tones, the familiar ballad, "Home, Sweet Home." Coming as it did from the darkness without and the cold, wet street, it was strangely pathetic in Alma's ears, although it certainly borrowed no charm from the singer's musical skill or natural gifts.

"Poor creature!" she observed, pitifully; "she must be drenched to the skin in this rain-storm. I must give her a few pence, auntie, so that she may obtain a shelter for the night."

And she was soon standing under the portico, round which in summer roses wreathed in bright profusion, anxious to relieve the wretched wanderer who came shambling toward her.

A tall, gaunt woman, whose soiled and tattered garments scarcely concealed her emaciated form, with disheveled hair escaping from a battered bonnet hanging over her



shoulders; a miserable haggard being, reduced by poverty and love of drink to the lowest depths of want.

"A thousand thanks, my lady!" she whined, as Alma, with pitying words, pressed the money into her hand. "You are as good as you are beautiful, and may you be rewarded for your charity to the homeless wanderer, who has not tasted bread to-day."

She raised her heavy eyes to the girl, who had now drawn back into the gas-lighted hall, and with that glance her manner underwent a remarkable change. Her dull, black orbs kindled into brightness; her long fingers clutched Alma's arm with an iron gripe, while her gaze fastened on the fair face that alternately flushed and paled beneath her scrutiny.

"Why, it is you!" she exclaimed, with a shrill, wild laugh. "Grown up and handsome, and quite the lady. I thought this was the house; only sixteen years make so many changes one cannot feel sure. But now I recognize those yellow locks, and a certain something in those large dark eyes. Why, Alma, girl, have you no welcome to give your mother, who has come all these miles to see you?"

Surely this terrible woman was some escaped lunatic, thought Alma, who, although startled at the incident, especially by hearing her Christian name so unceremoniously pronounced by a stranger, was not alarmed, Cuthbert and Aunt Hester being close at hand.

"You are mistaken, my good woman," she said, vainly endeavoring to extricate herself. "Please to go quietly away; I have never seen you before."

"Oh, yes, you have, my dear, many and many a time, only you was too young to remember! Are you not my own dear daughter, though Mrs. Grantley was good enough to take care of you until I came to claim you?"

The grasp upon Alma's wrist grew closer still.

"Aunt Hester!" she cried, thoroughly unnerved.

And at the sound of her voice, Mrs. Grantley hastened to her side, followed by Cuthbert, whose curiosity was aroused by her long absence and hasty call. The ballad-singer, far from showing symptoms of fear at their approach, stood her ground, and was the first to speak.

"Mrs. Grantley, you may almost have forgotten me, for we have both grown older since I saw you last. I am Judith Rayner, and you know—none better—that this dainty lady, who shrinks with scorn and loathing from my very touch, is my child!"

Alma, expecting an indignant repudiation of this assertion, saw with consternation Hester Grantley's countenance assume an ashy pallor,

as she stammered imploringly: "Pray, Mrs. Rayner, release Alma, and come into the house. You have broken your promise, kept for so many years. For mercy's sake let this most unlucky business be discussed in private, where no one may overhear."

The girl's brain whirled in confusion as she followed the two elder women into the parlor which she had quitted with light step and buoyant heart a few minutes before. Now, she was crushed beneath the weight of a calamity her wildest dreams could never have pictured.

Possessed of many estimable qualities, by nature affectionate, frank, and generous, she was proud to a fault, and felt unspeakable degradation to owe her existence to this miserable outcast.

Was there no filial instinct to prevent the abhorrence that thrilled every fiber of her frame when gazing on her so-called mother? Was her proper home some wretched hovel where the poorest of the poor herded together in dirt, rags, and absolute want?

Proud Alma, who gloried in the belief that she was descended from an ancient and honorable race, though centuries ago their fortunes had decayed—Alma, who sometimes secretly wished her lot was cast even in a higher sphere among the great ones of the earth, was now humbled to the dust.

Hitherto, she seldom thought of her unknown parents, having been satisfied by hearing that they died during her infancy, yet sometimes she had pictured her mother, stately, serene, and graceful, a fair vision almost more exquisite than any reality was likely to have proved. How rudely was the fancy dispelled!

Pale and trembling, she sunk upon a chair, earnestly scanning Judith Rayner's features, hoping to find some redeeming trait, some gleam of tenderness or intelligence in eyes whose prevailing expression was that of low cunning.

Then, turning disappointed from her brief survey, she listened eagerly as the stranger spoke.

"You did not expect me, I'll be bound," she said, settling herself comfortably among the soft cushions of the little couch, regardless of its delicate covering, and her own dripping apparel. "I have come upon you quite an unpleasant surprise, though, after all, there is nothing strange in my wanting to see the girl I left with you as a baby. Really, she does you great credit."

"You should have stayed away," said Mrs. Grantley, severely. "You gave me your word that if I would take your child you would never molest me or claim her; to all intents and purposes she should be to you as one dead."



"If I ever promised all that it was because me and my old man was under a cloud. We was in trouble about that burglary, if you remember, and though we were innocent as unborn babes, the jury convicted us both. So as the child must have gone to the workhouse while I worked out my term, I was quite willing you should take her. But that is over long ago. Poor Sam is dead and gone, so Alma is all I have left me in the world."

She wiped her eyes with a corner of the ragged shawl, though it was doubtful whether there were any tears to dry.

"It is impossible I can receive you here," said Mrs. Grantley, after a short pause, speaking with great decision.

"Of course, mum, I am aware of that; folks of your quality could not associate with a poor creature like me. I never dreamt of intruding upon you after this evening, so Alma had best make up her little bundle and come along with me."

"With you!" echoed the lady, in astonishment. "Surely you cannot realize the nature of your proposition? She has been reared in comfort, well educated, in order that she might have means of support when I am taken from her, and is altogether a girl too delicately nurtured to endure an existence passed in scenes of squalor and misery."

"I don't see that," answered Judith, doggedly. "What does for me should be good enough for her."

"You shall not take her away. I will not permit her to leave this house."

"You cannot prevent me doing as I choose. No papers were signed, and there are plenty living who could swear she was the yellow-haired baby I was nursing when the cops carried me away, and you the lady who visited me in jail and offered to provide for her."

"But a young girl like Alma would be a burden to you in your wandering life," began Hester, timidly. She was quite unaware whether she could legally withstand a mother's claim, and her obvious perplexity gave Judith an advantage she was willing to press to its utmost limit.

"Have no fear of that," was her contemptuous answer. "She can sing in the streets, or at saloons, and with her good looks is sure to make her way."

"Oh, aunt," cried Alma, suddenly flinging herself at Mrs. Grantley's feet, "for pity's sake protect me from this woman who claims to be my mother."

"Calm yourself, poor child," returned Hester, weeping. "It is too true that you are Mrs. Rayner's daughter."

"Then you are not my aunt? There is no relationship between us?"

"You speak truly, Alma; but there are

links of strong affection which every year has perfected and made more enduring."

"If I had only known all this!" wailed the girl pitifully.

"I acted for the best. Now, I see it was an error to allow you to remain in ignorance of your real parentage. Oh, my darling, you look at me reproachfully, but listen before you condemn me."

She drew Alma to a seat beside her and began her explanation.

"More than seventeen years ago I lost my baby-girl by a frightful accident. One moment she was a smiling child, cooing, and leaping in my arms for joy, as from the open window I pointed out objects for her amusement; the next, stretched on the stones beneath, and I, half frantic, knew my babe had perished through my own culpable carelessness. You can fancy the mental torture I experienced, not only at the time, but for very long afterward."

"My husband had died before his child's birth, Cuthbert was a boy at school, I was left to brood over my wretchedness until my mind was in danger of becoming affected. Vainly doctors recommended change of scene, amusement, cheerful society, anything to divert my thoughts from the catastrophe; but wherever I went, that crushed, disfigured form was ever before me, I was consumed by a longing to infold a living, breathing babe in my arms, to pillow an infant head upon my bosom, to feel the pressure of tiny fingers. Then I fancied, not that I might forget—what mother ever wishes to forget her child?—but might become more reconciled to my loss."

"About that time I happened to read in the local newspapers an account of a burglary, for which a man named Rayner and his wife were sentenced to a term of penal servitude. Some touching remarks were made upon the destitute condition of their infant child, left worse than orphaned upon the mercies of strangers. That paragraph gave me the first idea of finding solace for my grief, and performing at the same time an act of charity."

"I visited Mrs. Rayner in prison, proposed to adopt her babe, and give it such advantages as were in my power to bestow, while she agreed to forego a parent's rights, and hold no further communication with the child or me. You know, Alma, her confidence was not misplaced; I have loved and tended you as my own daughter."

"My more than mother," murmured the girl, "the gratitude of a lifetime would not repay your affectionate care!"

"My next visit," continued Mrs. Grantley, "was to the neighbor in whose charge your mother had left you. She was very poor, and anxious to be relieved from further re-



sponsibility. My heart opened to you at once; you were so pretty and intelligent, seeming almost to understand that I intended to befriend you, for you nestled contentedly in my arms, and smiled when I caressed you.

"And now it was I made my first mistake. I disliked the notion that your parentage should be known to every busybody who chose to inquire on the subject. What would it profit you to bear the name of Grantley, if it were blazoned throughout the town that you were a child of the Rayners'?"

"After bribing the woman to secrecy, I called upon one or two gossiping friends who were certain to spread the news, and told them I was about to adopt an orphan niece of my late husband's, whose parents, when living, had resided in a distant part of the country. No doubts arose as to the correctness of my statement, and on my return from a railway journey, undertaken on purpose to disarm suspicion, it seemed no thing strange to find me accompanied by a tiny stranger, for whose reception in the household all necessary preparations had been already made.

"And now, Alma, I have explained the reason why I fell into error, for deception is always wrong, and had I been more candid, you would have escaped the bitterness of making this sudden discovery. Will you forgive me for the trouble I have cost you?"

"This is all very fine talking," broke in Judith, rousing herself from a half-dozze into which she had fallen, produced by the heat of the room and her previous libations; "but what are you going to do?"

"Cuthbert, advise me," said Alma's protectress, turning toward her son, who was standing, his back to the fire, his hands in his pockets, apparently an indifferent spectator of the scene before him. He answered his mother's appeal with a sullen air.

"What business have you to interfere between parent and child? You must extricate Miss Rayner from the difficulties in which your own folly involved her without assistance from me. Indeed, I have much cause for complaint in being deceived for years by your plausible account of our relationship to a girl who is in reality a convict's daughter."

He left the room with a grand air of conscious rectitude, congratulating himself on having planted another thorn in Alma's heart as part payment for her afternoon's impertinence.

There was a long silence. Mrs. Grantley remained immersed in thought. Her strange visitor eyed her furtively, and Alma struggled to regain composure.

"I am not rich," began Hester, at length. "As you know, I am an artist's widow, possessing only a life-interest in the small property

he was able to bequeath. Yet I would make some sacrifice in order to keep Alma with me without any unpleasant exposure."

"Ah, now you talk reasonably," returned the other, visibly brightening. "I can't be expected to give up the company of my only child and keep a still tongue unless it is made worth my while."

"I have scarcely any money in the house at present; perhaps to-morrow I may be able to borrow a sum sufficient to induce you to leave us in peace. If I assist you in maintaining yourself until you can obtain some kind of settled employment, will you consent to forsake the disreputable, wandering life you seem how to be leading, and trouble us no more?"

Judith Rayner was loud in her asseverations that she would sacrifice her maternal feelings and accede to Mrs. Grantley's wishes for a suitable remuneration.

"Then matters may be arranged to our mutual satisfaction," said the latter, more cheerfully. "Now, Mrs. Rayner, if you will give me your address, you shall hear from me in a day or two."

Judith drew nearer to the blazing fire.

"I should find it difficult to do as you ask me even if I had the will," she said, dryly. "The work-house or the prison have been my only home this many a long year. Between whiles I go about the country, living as best I can, and at night sleeping under a doorway or in an empty barn. I am afraid at my address, as you call it, a letter would hardly reach me."

"Then what do you propose?" began Hester, with so much nervous trepidation, that the woman perceived and hastened to profit by her manifest terror and uncertainty.

"I don't mean to leave this house without either the girl or the money. Whichever you please, it makes no difference to me, though it would be rather hard for such a delicate miss to turn out of this comfortable home on such a night. Listen to the rain beating against the windows, and I never heard the wind wail more bitterly. Better let me stop here until you can raise the needful, then I shall be ready to say 'Thank you,' 'Good-by.'"

No remonstrances or entreaties could move her; and Mrs. Grantley, uncertain whether Alma could lawfully resist a mother's authority until she was of full age, did not dare to use defiance, the only weapon that would have effectually checked the advances of the enemy. In vain she pleaded and temporized; Judith was firm as a rock, and had no intention of quitting at present her comfortable quarters.

The weaker will was forced to succumb to the stronger, and much against the inclination of the mistress of the house, Mrs. Rayner was allowed to remain. In the morning Hester



would visit the rector, an old and intimate friend, who would, she hoped, advance a sufficient sum to rid her of this domestic incubus.

"I don't know where you can sleep," she observed, despondingly, with a thought of the visitor's drenched and soiled apparel, and the pretty white draperies of the one spare chamber.

"I'll sleep on the rug before the kitchen fire; it will be snug and warm enough for me."

So it was arranged that Judith Rayner should be given into the charge of Betsy, whose mind was too obtuse to be easily troubled by any doubts concerning the advent of this unexpected guest. Betsy should attend to her wants and make her comfortable, on condition—here Mrs. Grantley laid great stress upon her words—that Alma's name was not even mentioned.

"Of course, as a mother, I do not wish to injure my child by making her the common talk unless I am drove to do it," remarked Judith, loftily, "though she *do* turn from me with such disdain. I suppose now, pretty one, you would not put your arms round my neck and let me kiss your cherry lips, for a king's ransom."

Alma turned away almost shuddering, while the unwelcome visitor laughed discordantly.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A MIDNIGHT CONFESSION.

THE midnight chimes were sounding, yet Alma had not retired to rest, well knowing sleep would refuse to visit her pillow while her mind was harassed and disturbed. She half-reclined upon the low window seat in her chamber, looking out upon the gloom that seemed in unison with her own thoughts. A shade of self-reproach troubled her conscience; this stranger, repulsive in appearance and rude of speech, was her parent, and as such entitled to a measure of filial regard. It was impossible she could love or respect her; the sensitive girl had no feeling in common with the out-cast, whose career was stained with crime, yet she acknowledged it was her duty to assume a more courteous bearing, and evince at least the semblance of kindness. So urgent became the promptings of this inward monitor, that she resolved not to wait until morning before seeking her newly-found mother, and making some atonement for her error.

The rain was over, and from amidst the breaking clouds the moon sailed forth in silvery splendor, as Alma, wrapped in her white dressing gown, her bright hair hanging over her shoulders, crept softly down-stairs. A light was burning in the sitting-room; through the half-open door she beheld Judith Rayner seated at the table, with a bottle of choice

cognac (Cuthbert's special property) before her; to judge from her flushed countenance and glassy stare, she had been freely imbibing the contents. In truth, Judith, with an eager longing for her favorite liquor, had seized the opportunity after the family had retired to rest to make a thorough search throughout the lower portion of the premises, until perseverance met its due reward, and she attained the object of her desire.

Alma shuddered at the sight, but it was clearly her duty to use such influence as she might possess in endeavoring to reclaim the degraded being to whom she owed her birth. Noiselessly she advanced and stood before her. The moonlight streaming in at the window shed a ghastly reflection on her pale face and white robe. She resembled a fair phantom revisiting the scenes of its earthly troubles, rather than a maiden of mortal mold. Judith's eyes dilated as they gazed, her teeth chattered with fear as, extending her hands to ward off nearer approaches, she faltered, "She is here again! How that girl haunts me! I've seen her often, but never so life-like as she appears to-night."

"I did not mean to frighten you," said Alma, amazed at the strange reception.

"Oh, is it you?" sighed Judith, with an air of relief. "You come stealing down upon a body in the dead of night, and give me quite a turn."

"For whom did you take me?" inquired the girl, curiously.

"I have always been a bit nervous and easily startled," her companion rambled on; "at least, ever since that terrible snowy night many years ago. Though it was not my fault if the young thing perished; no one could say I killed her."

She was becoming garrulous, and losing self-control as the fumes of the brandy mounted to her brain.

"Mother," said Alma, in an awe-stricken whisper, "surely you have never been accused of murder!"

"Why, bless you, child, how could they, when nobody knew I met her? It was one bitterly cold winter night, just the turn of Christmas, the snow lay deep over the country, for all the world like a large white shroud. It was not yet over, but falling fast in heavy flakes. I had been in the town all day, trying to earn a few pence by charing or running errands, for times were bad with us, and Sam out of work, as usual. But just as I reached the most lonely part of the road coming home, and stood still for a moment, uncertain which way to turn—the snow made everything look so much alike—I heard a woman's voice close behind me. 'Will you please to direct me to Eaglehurst?' it said.



"I stopped and stared at her. She was very young, and might have been pretty, if she had not looked so pale and ill. She shivered from head to foot, and seemed half frozen and so tired she could scarcely stand. I could see, even in the darkness, she was well dressed, though her fur-lined traveling cloak and velvet hat were nearly covered with snow. I told her Eaglehurst was almost a mile distant, and she began to cry, saying she would never reach it. It seems she arrived at the station earlier in the evening, the few vehicles on hire were all engaged, so she thought she could walk the distance. Then came a driving, blinding snow-storm. She lost her way, and mooned about for hours, till she was quite worn out, and ready to drop.

"Was there any nearer shelter?" she asked.

"Yes; there was my cottage, I told her—a poor tumble-down hut, it was true, not fit for a lady to enter. But at least she would have a roof over her head that inclement night, and a supper, too, if so be she could eat hard bread and drink skim milk; though, of course, I could not afford to put myself out of the way unless she was ready to pay me handsomely.

"Do not be afraid," she said; "I have a few trinkets left which I believe are valuable, though I am no great judge, and my purse is not quite empty."

"With that she unfastened the small black traveling bag she carried, and showed me a necklace, besides a purse which seemed half-full of gold.

"You need not fear but that you will be well rewarded," she said.

"Then you took her home?" observed Alma, gently, as her companion paused, appearing disinclined to resume her narrative. "You would not hesitate to perform so slight a service."

"I meant to treat her well," continued Judith, in the dreamy manner of one whose thoughts are in the past. "I can swear that when I offered her shelter I never intended a hair of her head should be harmed; but somehow an evil spirit came tempting me directly I got the little bag in my hand. I had offered to carry it, and it felt heavy—perhaps it held far more than I already knew. I remembered the empty cupboard at home, the empty grate, the snow falling through the rafters on the heap of rags we called our bed, and how hard I worked for a bare crust, not enough to keep the wolf from the door. If I took the lady in for the night, she would dole out a few shillings in payment, and depart next day; if I could keep that bag, with all its valuables, I should be rich for life.

"The road divided near the place where we were standing; one path led to the wood where my husband had built our hut, the other to the river bank,

"It was by the latter way I took her."

The breath came fast from Alma's parted lips. With hands closely pressed upon her throbbing heart, she waited in silent horror for the next sentence.

"Why do you tremble, little fool?" cried Judith, roughly. "Do you think I raised my hand against her? No, no; she saved me the trouble. We had scarcely reached the bank, when her foot slipped upon the snow, and I heard the dark waters splash as they received her. It was no use my staying. I made off as fast as I could, her one wild cry for help ringing in my ears; but my speed never slackened until I got home at last, and sat down to count over my gains."

"And the girl was drowned? Oh, mother!" Alma could say no more; her heart seemed breaking.

"Suppose she was, do you think she was the only one who suffered?" demanded Judith, fiercely. "Night and day I seem to hear a voice that says I killed her; and though it is a lie, I cannot choose but listen. Then when I am alone she stands before me, with tear-stained cheeks and dripping hair, just as if she had risen out of the water. How would you like to look up suddenly and see a dead woman at your elbow? Even the money never did me good—it was a paltry sum, after all. The jewels I dared not sell, lest suspicion should fall upon me, so I hid them away in the little black bag with a lot of papers and other rubbish. But from that time I hated work more than ever, and lost all fear of crime. I persuaded Sam to seek the company of men who put him up to all their doings, and fancied we were going to make a fortune without the trouble of labor. However, we wanted luck or skill, for nothing turned out well. *He* died in prison, and as for me, you can see how I have prospered."

She glanced superciliously at her ragged attire, and laughed in derision.

"Mother, why have you told me this?" asked Alma.

"Because the fit was on me. I always thought it would give me ease to unburden my mind; but I never did, for folks might talk, and get me into trouble. But with you, Alma, I am safe, for if you betrayed me, I could revenge myself by making you share my disgrace."

"I shall not betray you," she said with ashen lips.

"That's right, my girl, and don't you fancy the blame was all mine. Why was she straying about the country alone, with sorrow written in every line of her worn countenance, and putting temptation in a poor body's way with her money and fal-lals? The Clintons of Eaglehurst, a purse-proud race, who bore no good repute throughout the county, perhaps could answer the question."



Alma was silent. Imagination raised a visionary picture of that bygone night, the falling snow, the despairing girl struggling in the ice cold river until death released her from suffering. A loud exclamation dispelled her reverie.

"I believe this house is haunted," cried Mrs. Rayner; "for years I have not thought so much upon the past as I have done to-night. You, child, look like an accusing ghost, and I saw just now through the half-open door two eyes fixed upon me, shining out of the darkness. Fool that I was not to let the dead rest!"

"Compose yourself, mother; you are under a delusion. We are here alone, together."

"I'll talk no more," observed Judith, decisively. "Some things are best forgotten. Every word I say makes you hate and despise me worse than before."

Alma approached the unbappy woman and took her hand.

"No, mother; I pity you too deeply. Be not hopeless and despairing, but try from this hour to lead a life of honest work and patient well-doing. I ask it for my sake, if you will not for your own."

"I will try," said Judith, humbly. She permitted Alma without remonstrance to take possession of the cherished liquor for which she so greatly craved, and carry it away to a place of security. Then, with a whispered good-night, the two separated, the girl ascending to her own prettily appointed chamber to weep and pray for the unrepentant sinner; while Judith dragged her weary limbs to the room below, where a thick rug and a pile of cushions had been spread before the fire for her accommodation.

The next morning, much to the astonishment of Hester Grantley and her *protegee*, it was discovered that their strange visitor had departed, leaving no trace behind.

In vain they searched for some scrap of writing which should assign a reason for her mysterious behavior. Had she left in a fit of remorse for having troubled the serenity of Alma's life, or only temporarily vacated her quarters, intending soon to return and claim the reward for her forbearance? They could not tell.

For days they waited with a strange feeling of suspense and insecurity, expecting every moment to see the gaunt, shabbily clad figure making its way toward their modest dwelling.

A loud ring at the door-bell made them tremble; a passing footstep caused their hearts to beat more quickly. But as time passed over, and Judith remained absent, these anticipations merged into a sensation of relief from a heavy burden, and a vague wonder as to the motives that had prompted her sudden disappearance.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MISS MARFORD'S LOVERS.

EAGLEHURST was a massively built mansion of grand and solemn aspect, with that venerable air which leads the mind to dwell instinctively on bygone ages and generations long since passed away. It had a turreted roof, mullioned windows, and rough, gray walls, to which the ivy clung. A huge stone eagle, with outstretched wings, seemed hovering over the door; two others, in a state of solemn quietude, guarded the entrance.

And now, as the sunshine of a glorious July afternoon streamed on the grand old house standing in its extensive grounds, it looked noble and picturesque enough to justify the strong attachment with which its owners, the Clintons, had always regarded it.

Oswald, now the head of the family, was in his library, reading. He was a tall, muscular man, about thirty-seven years of age, dark complexion, with closely-cropped dark hair, and eyes of so deep a brown that one would scarcely hesitate in pronouncing them to be black. Most persons admired the statuesque regularity of his features, and the intellectual expression of his thoughtful face. But some young ladies condemned him already as an elderly fogey, because a few barely perceptible silver threads were scattered amid his wavy hair and thick mustache, while there were lines upon his forehead certainly traced either by the finger of time or sorrow.

Presently a gentle tap was heard at the door. His sister Maud tripped in, an open letter in her hand.

"Well, Oswald, the matter is settled at last. After all her misgivings, Alma agrees to accept my proposal. Are you not glad?"

"Certainly, my dear, since it causes you so much pleasure. Though I should scarcely have thought you wanted a companion, when Rosamond—"

"Now, Oswald, do not be tiresome! Of course, Rosamond is beautiful, fascinating, and highly accomplished; no doubt you are never so happy as when in her society; but she could not be to me like my dear old school-fellow and *confidante*."

"I suppose not, Maudie."

"Besides, the dear girl really wants a home. You remember her aunt died suddenly more than a month ago, and Alma is left dependent on her cousin's generosity. She could not now remain at The Rosery."

"That is true. Well, let her come to us; we will try to make her comfortable."

"She has written such a funny letter," laughed Maud. "She accepts the situation I offer her, she says, only on condition that I remember the difference in position between us, and allow her to perform the ordinary



duties devolving on a lady-companion, without giving extra privileges or higher remuneration. It is to be in all respects like a business transaction between strangers. Certain services are to be required and rendered without scruple on either side. I had no idea Alma was so humble-minded; I fancied she was very high-spirited."

"Perhaps she possesses the pride that apes humility," answered her brother. "But I will wait until I have the pleasure of making your friend's acquaintance before judging her harshly. When do you expect her to arrive?"

"I shall drive over to fetch her the day after to-morrow."

"Then I shall not be long kept in suspense. And now, Maud, you must excuse me, for I have promised to ride over to Marford Hall some time to-day; and as I have a business engagement for the afternoon, this is my only opportunity. Rosamond is selecting a dress for a fancy ball. This book of old engravings may assist her. So, little Maudie, good-by for the present."

Nodding smilingly to the young girl, who, owing to the difference in years between them, he regarded almost as a child, he quitted the library.

Maud, standing at the window, soon saw him slowly riding down the avenue, mounted on his powerful black horse, Rajah.

While Oswald Clinton was leisurely taking his way along the country roads, enjoying the beauty of the summer day, Rosamond Marford was sitting in her morning-room, ostensibly engaged in copying a water-color sketch, under the direction of her drawing-master, Cuthbert Grantley. Of course they were not alone. An elderly lady, formerly governess, but now promoted to the post of chaperon, sat in a distant corner, fully convinced she was playing propriety during the progress of that lesson; but the day was warm, and the lady drowsy. Slumber stole gently over her senses, and the book she had been reading dropped neglected on her knee.

Cuthbert, who was slyly watching the symptoms of weariness which he knew from experience were apt to overtake the worthy matron, drew nearer to his fair pupil, even venturing to take her hand.

"Rosamond, my darling—I may call you so, may I not?—I have been inwardly rebelling against the necessity for silence and self-control when I am longing to tell you how dearly you are loved."

"Cuthbert, I implore you to be cautious. Mrs. Hill—"

"Is fast asleep. We need not fear her. Long before she has finished her nap you can have whispered once again the sweet confession of your love."

"Do not ask me," she murmured, looking down and blushing. "I have been foolish and impudent enough already."

"You cannot regret an avowal which has made me so happy. True, you are the daughter of a rich man, and I only a poor artist; yet unequal alliances have taken place, insuring the felicity of those who esteemed constancy and affection beyond all other treasures."

"My father will never consent."

"We might be married privately. When he found opposition useless, for your dear sake he would forgive us both."

"You are mistaken, Cuthbert. He would be enraged at my disobedience."

"But if we are happy in our mutual devotion," he whispered, insinuatingly—"unless, indeed, you have not sufficient fortitude to endure a comparatively humble lot! I could not pretend, dearest Rosamond, to offer you at The Rosery the luxuries you enjoy at Marford Hall; yet, if you fear poverty, dismiss that fear as groundless, for my poor talents and unremitting labor shall provide my wife with every comfort."

"Oh, as to that, I am not afraid. There is my mother's fortune, of which papa cannot deprive me."

Cuthbert's eyes flashed with pleasure. She was wealthy, and independent of her father, besides being young and handsome. What an eligible match for an ambitious bachelor! How fortunate Alma had refused him!

Her next words, however, considerably damped his gratification.

"But ours is a luckless attachment!" she sighed, with the coy, yet sentimental glance a finished coquette alone can give. "It must end in sorrow and separation."

"Dearest, what mean you?"

"I have been engaged some years—indeed, ever since I was almost a child—to Oswald Clinton."

This was a slight exaggeration, but the lady liked to be still considered a maiden in her teens.

"I had heard the report, but could not believe it. You do not intend to marry him now, Rosamond?"

"What can I do?" she answered. "My father approves the match, and I can find no decent pretext for refusal."

"Say that you do not love Mr. Clinton as a girl should love her future husband."

"Oh, Cuthbert! how can I? It would sound so bold and unmaidenly."

She said this, his hand still clasping hers, his breath upon her cheek, and she betrothed to another who trusted in her faith and honor. But she was somewhat heartless as well as coquettish, and had been trained to prize wealth and position beyond their just value.



If Cuthbert had owned Eaglehurst and its rent-roll, she would have been far more displeased at the prospect of her approaching marriage, for his flattery and pretended ardor made her dissatisfied with her less demonstrative lover. But she was not prepared to brave the sneers, or, worse still, the pity, of her acquaintance by eloping with her drawing-master.

"Come what may, you shall never marry Oswald Clinton!" was Cuthbert's answer to her last speech. "He is not worthy such a peerless wife. If you have not moral courage to set yourself free from the bonds with which they have fettered you, I will attempt your deliverance; for I know you love me, Rosamond, my loveliest, rose of the world!"

They had only time to start asunder, for Mrs. Hill awoke suddenly as the man-servant entered with the announcement that Mr. Clinton entreated to see Miss Marford.

"Dear, dear!" said the good lady, rousing herself; "what an early visitor! But, no," she continued, after glancing at the ormolu timepiece, "it is nearly two o'clock. How the morning slips away when one is reading an interesting book! I fear, Mr. Grantley, that Miss Marford, who is such an enthusiastic artist, has trespassed too long on your valuable time, for it is past your usual hour for leaving us. Well, we must detain you no longer."

Cuthbert, thus dismissed, took his leave, scowling upon his unconscious rival, whom he encountered on the stairs; and Rosamond resigned herself with equanimity to the task of receiving and entertaining her betrothed.

While she and Oswald were together, conversing with that languid interest often shown by persons who have not sympathetic natures, Cuthbert Grantley stalked moodily toward Clinton Wood, thinking how best to sustain those castles in the air which appeared in danger of being demolished.

Cunningly had he striven to win Rosamond's love, knowing that she was motherless and her chaperon simple and unobservant. If for awhile his passion for Alma diverted him from his pursuit of the heiress, it was only to return later with renewed energy. Now he felt enraged at discovering his influence was not all-paramount, and that Rosamond clearly had no present intention of dissolving her engagement.

He could neither compose his mind sufficiently to enable him to follow his ordinary occupations, nor even return home, but wandering listlessly into the wood, where the thick foliage of many trees formed a canopy of protection from the sunshine, he stretched himself upon the long grass, ruthlessly plucking and scattering to the breeze every wild flower that grew within his reach.

"I will not lose Rosamond," he muttered.

"Why should I be thwarted in all my plans by woman's folly? As to the convict's daughter, it was well she was blind to her own interests, as it saved me the trouble of getting rid of her when I discovered her disreputable parentage. But now it is a different matter. Oswald Clinton, you will have to fight for your bride before I consent to relinquish her!"

By slow degrees the day wore away. The sky changed from gold to crimson, then into a deep purple; the pale disk of a full moon arose, and countless stars became visible between the interstices formed by quivering leaves stirred in the soft night breeze.

The young man slowly rose to his feet, and inspired by a new resolution, took his way toward a deserted, miserable-looking but standing on the borders of the wood, half-covered with creeping plants, that, tangled together in a wild luxuriance, obscured all external evidence of either door or window. It had certainly been uninhabited for many years, no one having cared to take possession of such an uncomfortable and lonely dwelling.

Cuthbert smiled as he surveyed the dilapidated walls.

"Judith Rayner has been the last tenant," he observed, "and I should guess from these interlacing thorns and briars that a strange footstep rarely invades the precincts."

He made no attempt to enter the hut, but with some difficulty penetrated to the rear, then paused beside the huge trunk of an immense oak, which, blasted by lightning and entirely denuded of branches, stood bare and dark against the summer sky.

Continually peering around to make certain his movements were unwatched, Cuthbert with great care groped amidst the masses of overgrowing ivy until he found the hollow he sought.

A flush of excitement arose upon his pale visage as from its strange hiding-place he drew forth a discolored, mildewed mass, which proved to be a small, black valise, wrapped in an old waterproof coat. Large pieces of the tree's outer bark had been carefully arranged to form a complete covering which further protected it from the vicissitudes of weather; so, that, although many years had passed since it was placed in the cavity, it remained still in a state of extraordinary preservation. The young man's look brightened as he regarded it.

"Will my purpose be served by the contents of this valise?" he muttered; "or am I mistaken in supposing that I hold the clew to a mystery which Oswald Clinton would not desire to see unraveled?"

Without waiting to examine its contents he rapidly strode homeward, wearing the satisfied air of one whose expedition has resulted successfully.



## CHAPTER V.

## A WORD OF WARNING.

A DAY of almost tropical heat, the grass brown and scorched, flowers drooping as if they pined for moisture, corn ripening in the fields, fruit growing ruddier in the orchard, and two girls sitting on garden chairs under a spreading elm-tree in the center of the lawn at Eaglehurst.

"How hot the sun is this afternoon, and how lazy the warm weather makes me feel," said Maud, with a little sigh of weariness. "Yet I promised grannie to go to Dame Duffle's cottage, and I suppose I must keep my word."

"Is the dame one of Mrs. Clinton's pensioners?" inquired Alma.

"Yes; and she wants a letter written to her grandson, who is in some outlandish place at the antipodes. Mrs. Lavinia's sight is bad, so in a moment of weak good-nature I consented to act as correspondent, but really it is a great deal of trouble."

"Dear Maud, there is no occasion for you to undertake a walk for which you seem disinclined. I am quite at your service if you will allow me to act as deputy."

"Oh, Alma, you are so energetic. You seem never happy unless making yourself useful."

"Perhaps it is owing to my plebeian origin," observed the girl, with a bitter smile, "which is perhaps a little higher than that held by burglars and convicts. Why, Maud, how you stare; of course I am only joking."

"I do believe, Alma," said Maud, after a few moments' consideration, "you are so proud that you sometimes feel vexed because you were not born a princess or a duchess. Never mind, my dear; perhaps one day the accident will be rectified. When my brother Oswald is married to Rosamond Marford, of course they will give grand balls and entertainments. And you are so beautiful, Alma—so very beautiful, that I should not be surprised if you made some wonderful conquest."

Alma alternately flushed and paled, as she said, in a calm, cold voice:

"Please, Maud, never indulge such foolish fancies. And be sure of this. If all the unmarried millionaires in America were suing for my hand, I should refuse them, every one."

"Do you never mean to marry?" asked Maud, aghast. "Have you taken what the nuns call a vow of celibacy?"

"No vows are required to sustain my resolution. I stand apart from the rest of woman-kind, wishing neither to love nor to be loved. Friendship, such as I feel for you, dear Maud, is to be my warmest passion."

"Oh, Alma, and I have been amusing myself with thinking what interest I should take in your courtship and marriage, the kind of suitor I would persuade you to accept, the

trimmings of your wedding-dress, and the diamonds you should wear. You would be the beauty of the season, of that there is little doubt. Even Oswald admires you, although you are not at all the same style as Rosamond."

"How can you talk such folly?" said Alma, reproachfully, though conscious of a slight curiosity to hear what Oswald had said concerning her.

"Folly, forsooth! Now, to punish your rudeness, you shall not hear one word of his pretty compliment, unless, indeed, you ask me in your prettiest manner."

"I will not allow you to minister to my vanity. Come, Maud, a truce to jesting; tell me where I shall find Dame Duffle's cottage."

Maud gave very explicit directions, which Alma promised to obey. Then she started on her mission, with light, elastic step that scarcely bowed the daisies which spangled the sward beneath her feet, her fair face protected from intrusive sunbeams by the broad-brimmed straw hat she wore. Over the shady lawn she passed, where giant trees linked their arms together, forming an impervious shelter from the heat, down emerald vistas, where many birds had built their nests and caroled songs of welcome to their lovely visitor.

Then, leaving the grounds by a side gate, she traversed a country road fragrant with honeysuckle and wild roses until she reached a small gray church with Gothic walls and stained glass windows. Entering the burial ground reverently, tended and bright with flowers, through a wicket gate, Alma pursued her way, casting from time to time a glance at some lofty mausoleum telling of departed greatness, or oftener gazing on some simple slab where wreaths of fragrant flowers laid by the hand of affection were withering in the sunshine.

Alma remembered Aunt Hester's grave, and turned aside from the main path to visit the secluded spot where the friend of her childhood lay. She had not gone far when her attention was attracted by the tall figure of a man clad in a tweed suit, a low-crowned felt hat upon his head. He stood beside a low gray stone in an attitude either of sadness or reflection.

Once he stooped to remove a small bough of dead leaves which the village children in their play had thrown there and forgotten. The stately form, some inches above the average height, and regular profile were familiar to Alma, who recognized Mr. Oswald Clinton. Unwilling to obtrude upon his notice, she slackened her pace, and in a few moments he had resumed his walk, and was soon lost in the distance.

Alma went slowly on, indulging in idle speculations as to the reason why the master of Eaglehurst lingered by that humble grave.



The Clintons for many past generations had been laid to rest in the family vault, yet that bowed head and reverent gesture showed that the spot was hallowed by a tender memory. Her look sought the smooth, gray stone, inscribed with but one word—"Amy." No date, no surname, nor long panegyric on departed worth—nothing to indicate age, station, or condition. It must be owned Alma was slightly disappointed.

"Has he gone, Miss Grantley? I did not care to meet him here," whispered a voice beside her; and Mrs. Lavinia Varley, old Mrs. Clinton's confidential maid, stole from beneath the shadow of a willow-tree which had previously sheltered her from observation. "My eyes are growing dim," she continued, "and can see to no great distance. Is he quite out of sight?"

"Do you mean Mr. Clinton?" answered Alma, rather startled by the sudden apparition. "I think he has left the churchyard."

"So much the better, my dear. He is not wanted here."

From a small basket carried on her arm she drew forth a cluster of pure white roses, intermingled with jessamine, and deposited it upon the slab.

"An old woman's offering, my dear. This is her birthday. Is it not strange to think that if she had lived she would have been a middle-aged woman now, her merry ways sobered down; no longer brimming over with laughter, but calm and pensive; perhaps a few wrinkles on her smooth white brow? Poor, poor Amy! you would have changed from your bright girlhood; but not so much changed as when I saw you last."

"You knew her, then?" inquired Alma.

"Knew her? That indeed I did! She was my only sister's only child."

"And she died young?"

"Died at nineteen. Oh, what a pitiful end to a life full of bright promise!"

"Poor girl!" sighed Alma; and, moved with compassion for the early dead, she detached a spray of creamy white narcissi that fastened the lace she wore around her neck, and placed it beside the roses.

The spinster looked kindly on her.

"Thank you, Miss Grantley. You have a tender heart. You would not have been one of those who condemned her." Then, after a moment's pause, she continued: "Amy was only a country girl, but handsomer than many a lady born, and almost as clever. Her father was district schoolmaster, my dear. He taught her all he knew, and she loved nothing better than study. However, when he died, I thought it a rare piece of good luck when the younger Mrs. Clinton took Amy into her service. It was partly through my persuasion. Oh, how that knowledge has preyed upon me since! I

thought it would be so pleasant to have my pretty niece near me. You see, Miss Grantley, that even then, so many years ago, I was maid to Mr. Guy Clinton's mother, who has always lived at Eaglehurst, and Amy was to wait upon his wife. At first all seemed to go on well. Then, by degrees, the shadow of coming trouble fell upon me. Perhaps I did not watch the girl carefully enough, trusting too much to her discretion and prudence. I know Mr. Ashe warned me; but I was blind, and would not, or could not, see."

"Who was Mr. Ashe?" questioned Alma, with girlish interest in the old lady's story.

"He was Mr. Oswald's tutor, and also a distant relation. This good young man, who had taken holy orders and was so pious and studious that everybody agreed he would be an ornament to his profession, once bade me beware of Mr. Oswald. There were meetings in the meadows, and sometimes a few words exchanged, after church service, between his pupil and my niece, which he thought imprudent considering their difference in position. But how could I suspect harm to happen from a mere youth full of fun and frolic paying a few compliments, maybe, to a pretty girl about his own age? Ah, if I had only guarded her more carefully!"

A tear coursed down the faded cheek of vain regret over the irrevocable past.

"Then, did harm come of it?" inquired Alma, timidly.

Somehow, it was painful to associate the thought of Mr. Oswald with wrong. She had known him but a short time, yet his fine face, stately bearing and chivalrous manners, had impressed her in his favor. It was sad to reflect that such a noble manhood might have been preceded by the follies—nay, the vices of a reckless youth.

"I must not make a long story of all that occurred afterward," resumed the spinster, with a sad smile, "or I shall detain you too long and weary you. In the short space of one month all kinds of changes happened at Eaglehurst. First, Mr. Ashe received a call. Mr. Clinton had used his influence to obtain it. So the young man went to a distant county, where he died suddenly not many months after, poor fellow. The best are always taken first. But the very week he left us the whole household could see that Mr. Oswald and his father were on bad terms."

"What caused their quarrels?" asked Alma.

"They were about Amy. One of the servants, hearing their voices raised in dispute, listened at the closed door, and says her name was mentioned. Then—oh, the sin, and shame, and misery!—my niece quitted Eaglehurst, leaving no letter nor message to tell us whither she had gone.

"But did Mr. Oswald know?"



"He always denied that her flight was at his instigation, or that he had ought to do with the matter. Yet his manner was strange; something seemed hidden under his apparent frankness, which caused him to be suspected. For it was not only I, dear Miss Grantley, who, remembering Mr. Ashe's warning, felt sure Mr. Oswald, if he chose, could give tidings of Amy, but my mistress, and even his father, had doubts regarding him. I read it in their looks and in hints dropped. At last there were so many family quarrels, that Mr. Oswald would bear it no longer, but started on a long Western trip. When he returned, the affair was hushed up, and things went on pretty much the same as usual."

"Did you ever see Amy again?"

"Only once. Then she lay pale and silent, keeping her secret to the last."

"You mean that she was dead?"

"Her body was found floating in the river one bitter winter morning. I went and identified it, for I had heard it whispered that the drowned woman, whose body awaited an inquest at the village hotel, was my once gay and beautiful niece. Miss Grantley, are you ill? You look as if you were about to faint."

"No, no, Mrs. Varley; but your story is sad, and gives me pain."

"Poor tender-hearted child, you are too young to be familiar with sin and suffering. If you live to be old, your sympathies will grow dumber and colder; you will not then grieve over trials endured by those who have gone before you. And now can you guess why I have recounted Amy's history?"

Alma hesitated, uncertain what reply to make.

"It is to give you warning," said Lavinia Varley, with sad solemnity. "You are an orphan without near ties of kindred, dwelling beneath Mr. Oswald's roof; young and very beautiful, not unlike Amy in the flower of her youth; confiding and innocent—so was she. A wedding ring was on her wasted hand when they found her, and who can say what promises lured her from her home? True that the master of Eaglehurst is now in mature manhood, and about to wed a lady in his own sphere; true that I have never been able to prove the correctness of my suspicions; yet my advice to you, given in all earnestness, is this—beware of Oswald Clinton."

With these words, the aged spinster pressed her young companion's hand, and left her to pursue her way.

A gloom had fallen upon Alma. She knew by a sure instinct that Mrs. Lavinia's niece, supposed to have committed self-destruction rather than bear the burden of remorse and desertion, was no other than the stranger who

had perished, if not by her mother's hand, at least according to her intention.

Whatever part Oswald might have taken in the life-drama which ended so tragically, he had been guiltless of goading to a suicide's doom a fond and trusting woman. Alma's sense of justice had received a cruel shock. She must keep silent and join in the implied condemnation, or betray a secret confided by her mother's lips. Yet why should she care to speak the truth? If Miss Lavinia's surmises were correct, Mr. Oswald was undeserving a second thought, except it were one of contempt and reprobation.

Absorbed in reverie, she quitted the churchyard, and walking on almost mechanically, found herself on the river path. The sun was beginning to sink in the west, and flooded the rippling waves with golden radiance before giving place to the placid loveliness of the rising moon. The boughs of the weeping willows that fringed the bank swayed gently in the breeze, and bent toward the lucid waters as if to survey their leafy forms within a mirror. From the meadows the lowing herds came down to drink, and children returning from an expedition to the woods stopped beside those tiny wavelets and laved their glowing faces in the pure, cool tide.

The river was rather narrow at that particular part, and Alma, glancing toward the opposite bank once more, perceived Oswald stretched at full length under a sheltering tree, cigar between his lips, and newspaper in hand. He had crossed the rustic bridge that spanned the stream a little further on, and given himself up to an hour's luxurious idleness. The girl sighed. Maud had already spoken so often of the good qualities of her indulgent brother that she experienced that sense of disenchantment which is of all others most depressing to the ardent mind of romantic youth.

But at that moment Alma sees an immense tawny mastiff rushing toward her, his jaws distended and covered with foam, his teeth gleaming, a dangerous fire in his wild eyes. She knows the dog is mad, and is bearing down upon her. Her trembling limbs almost refuse their support, the roses die out of the fair young cheeks, leaving them of marble whiteness. A death, a frightful death is before her. Whether the creature rends her in its fury until the work is completed, or leaves her to expire by slow torture, matters little. She stands transfixed; in her excited imagination her doom is already sealed.

In her extremity a timely remembrance flashes across her brain. Mad dogs have a horror of water; it would not follow her there. Let her drown a thousand times rather than feel those sharp teeth penetrate her quivering flesh.



She waits until the mastiff is close upon her, gnashing his fangs and biting the air. Then, with one despairing shriek, one piteous cry for aid, she plunges into the river.

The mastiff, with an impatient snarl of baffled rage, pursues his career.

The sudden shock of immersion deprives Alma of consciousness. Beautiful in its pallor her upturned face appears, her long amber hair floating upon the water, catching the full glory of the sun's last rays. Fair and pure as "Hamlet's" *Ophelia*, she goes to meet a similar doom!

But no, she is not to perish thus! Oswald Clinton's attention has been drawn to the terrible scene, and without waiting to divest himself of any portion of clothing, he takes a header and swims vigorously to the rescue.

Alma has disappeared by the time he thought to reach her. He dives until forced to return to the surface for air.

After a brief pause, by diving once more he succeeds in grasping the flowing tresses, finally managing to support her slight form in such a manner as not to impede his progress. Then he makes for the shore.

It seemed long ere he attained that wished-for haven; the weight of his saturated clothes bore him down and he had some distance to swim. Bravely he struggled on, his only fear lest he had arrived too late to save the fragile girl whose head drooped upon his shoulder. He directed his course toward a weeping willow, which, leaning over the steep bank, dipped its branches into the river, and by its kindly aid extricated himself and his companion from their perilous position. He laid Alma on the grass, and as well as he was able wrung the water from her dress and hair. It was vain to look round for assistance; no living being was visible in the rural solitude.

"Is she alive?" he questioned, placing his hand upon her heart, which, to his relief, he found was still beating. Slowly the dark, fathomless eyes unclosed, and Alma gazed into the face bent over her.

"Where am I? Did the brute touch me? Am I safe—quite safe?" she murmured, almost incoherently. Then, as full recollection returned, she realized the truth, and attempted to thank her preserver.

Mr. Clinton interrupted, though not discourteously, her professions of gratitude. He was anxious she should suffer no ill effects from her immersion.

"It will be the wisest plan to make our way to the nearest cottage," he said eagerly. "One of my grandmother's *protegees*, an ancient dame, who has passed all her life on the estate, lives close at hand. She is a civil, obliging creature, and will give you every assistance you may require. It is impossible you can

walk as far as Eaglehurst in those dripping clothes."

Without waiting for reply, he led her away. His usual air of proud reserve had disappeared; he talked cheerily, soothed the agitation she could not quite repress, and was gratified by observing that she gradually regained composure. Her step grew firmer, a smile rewarded his jests, and by the time they had reached Dame Duffle's cottage, her flower-like features had resumed their pristine tints, and the terror she had undergone was merged in a strange sweet tumult of feeling which caused her, while listening to the soft, sweet tones of Oswald's voice, to forget the warning uttered in the church-yard.

## CHAPTER VI.

### TWO MEETINGS.

"QUITE a romance!" observed Rosamond Marford, with a gleam of suspicion in her bright black eyes, and the faintest possible sneer upon her lips. "A timid damsel, whose fears of an imaginary danger placed her in real jeopardy, and your chivalrous brother boldly incurring a ducking for her sake! Do you really believe Miss Grantley fancied the mastiff was mad, or was it merely a ruse to engage Oswald's attention?"

"What can you mean, Rosamond?" said Maud, with wondering eyes. "Alma was nearly drowned, and—"

A rippling laugh from her fair companion interrupted her speech, a laugh very musical in sound, but bearing an inflection of scorn mingled with its merriment.

"Oh, my dear, do not be offended. Young persons in Miss Grantley's position are sometimes so artful and presuming, that it requires a certain amount of penetration to avoid being duped by their apparent simplicity."

"Perhaps you may not be aware, Miss Rosamond," said Maud, flushing with indignation, "that Alma was my schoolfellow and intimate friend long before she came to reside with me at Eaglehurst. You will understand, when you know her better, that she merits esteem as well as affection."

Rosamond bit her lip, and was silent. Strange as it may seem, she, an acknowledged beauty and an heiress, was jealous of this poor dependent girl, whose fair visage was her only dowry.

Though Oswald had never won her heart, she resented the knowledge that he had saved Alma's life, and evinced great interest and anxiety on her behalf, while a strong misgiving as to whether Cuthbert, too, would not be easily consoled by his beautiful cousin, when she herself should sacrifice love at the altar of



ambition, added a drop more bitterness to the infusion of gall, which is too apt to overflow when pride and vanity reign supreme in a woman's heart.

Rosamond had driven over to Eaglehurst in her low pony-carriage, in order to enjoy a long day in her dear Maud's society. After paying a duty visit to the dim and somber apartments where the aged Mrs. Clinton and her factotum, Lavinia Varley, dozed away half the bright summer hours, or talked over memories of a long-vanished past, the younger ladies had descended to the pretty room gay with flowers, bright-plumaged birds and delicately-tinted drapery, which was distinguished by the name of Maud's boudoir. Here Alma's adventure of the previous day was duly recounted by Miss Clinton, and commented on by her friend in the manner we have already seen.

The conference was disturbed by Oswald's entrance. He greeted his betrothed with a courtly gallantry which perhaps served to hide the absence of true lover-like ardor, inquired after Mr. Marford's health, and patted the round cheek of his pretty sister, whom, owing to the difference in their ages, he was wont to treat more as a petted child than a maiden fast ripening into womanhood.

Maud was the first to perceive that his left hand was bandaged, and carried in a sling.

"You are hurt!" she cried. "Why, Oswald, I shall begin to believe some witch has cast an evil spell over Eaglehurst. Each day brings forth a misadventure."

"Happily, mine is nothing serious; for an efficacious remedy has been already applied to what might have proved a source of future trouble."

"We shall expect to have our curiosity more fully satisfied," remarked Rosamond, lightly. "You must amuse us this long summer day in Othello-like fashion, by recounting the perils you have undergone."

"I will not be sufficiently egotistical to detain you such an unwarrantable time. My story is the sequel of yesterday's, and shall be briefly told. Early this morning I dispatched a party of men in search of the rabid brute which alarmed Miss Grantley (no doubt Maud has already acquainted you with all particulars) but the honor of preventing him from working further mischief was reserved for me. I happened to be passing through the woods near Lee Farm, when suddenly he sprung upon me. Fortunately, I carried a double-barreled gun, which I wielded to such purpose, that my adversary was soon stretched prostrate before me, not, however, before his sharp fangs had severely lacerated my hand and wrist. So, as a precaution from danger, I walked on to Doctor Murray, who cauterized the wounds."

"Ah!"

The deep-drawn aspiration, half-sigh, half-sob, proceeded from Alma's lips. She had entered the room unobserved, and overheard Oswald's narrative. The startled and distressed expression of her speaking countenance displeased Rosamond.

"Your nerves seem easily shattered, Miss Grantley," she remarked, with scarcely veiled rudeness; "or is it gratitude for Mr. Clinton's services of yesterday that makes you so very sympathetic to-day?"

"Surely you forget, Miss Rosamond, that Miss Grantley has very recently sustained a severe shock, which may well account for any agitation or nervousness she may display this morning," said Oswald Clinton, with some asperity, before the timid girl could venture a reply. "Many ladies indeed, would have considered themselves entitled to all an invalid's privileges, and a full week's enjoyment of Doctor Murray's professional attendance and sugared draughts, after the fright and immersion from which she has evidently not yet recovered."

Alma dared not even by a glance thank Oswald for his timely interference; it would have given her fair enemy another weapon with which to assail her maiden dignity, that chafed beneath the unprovoked assault.

In silence she moved toward the further end of the apartment, and busied herself with some fancy work which Maud was anxious to finish, although lacking the perseverance necessary to complete her task.

"Beware of Oswald Clinton!" How those words were ringing in her ear. She wished they had not been spoken. Then she might have admired and esteemed him, unrebuked by the inward monitor which now reproached her for the gratitude springing up so warmly in her heart for this man, who had loved and deserted Lavinia Varley's niece years ago.

She never dreamt of inspiring or being inspired with love; the felon's daughter deemed herself set apart from all domestic ties, even if she had not known that Mr. Clinton's choice was already made.

But she might have gazed upon that dear and noble countenance, whose expression seemed to indicate nobility of soul, which more than compensated for the loss of early youth's animation and brightness; she might have listened to his kindly voice, and without a blush given him a share of the friendship bestowed upon his sister Maud.

All through the day she kept rather apart from the rest, determined not to obtrude on Miss Marford's notice, who was, she felt, a secret foe. From a distance she watched the pretty feminine arts by which the coquette sought to lure and reclaim a heart that was



worthless in her estimation; for while she smiled on Oswald, her thoughts reverted to her artist lover. That evening she had consented to meet him in the park.

When once married, such disregard of the proprieties would, of course, be unallowable; but while still free the fair one was not troubled with many scruples. Provided it was not discovered, a little whispered love-making under the shadow of the grand old trees would gratify herself and Cuthbert in the present, and form a pleasant memory for the future, when, alas! that favored lover must be banished from her presence.

Rosamond heaved a little sigh in the midst of her playful discourse, and wished that some happy stroke of fortune would elevate Cuthbert Grantley to high position, even at the expense of his rival, her affianced husband.

It was growing late when the young lady tore herself away from "dear Eaglehurst," as she smilingly observed.

Oswald stood beneath the portico, after escorting her to her carriage, the cool breeze playing among the short locks that shaded his temples, his looks fixed on the receding vehicle. His thoughts were on the fair occupant, though they were scarcely those of love. She was beautiful and winning, he granted; his father might well have selected such a wife for his heir, believing the alliance would secure his happiness and enhance the honors of their ancient house. His father, who had doubted his word, and died still condemning him in his heart. Would it have been well to oppose that parent's wish—to decline a marriage he had arranged as sign and token of a half-forgiveness? Surely it was wise and noble to suppress his own misgivings, accept the offered bride, and thus make some reparation the sorrow he had wrought.

He admitted Rosamond's personal attractions, but the flaws of her character were sometimes apparent. The "ring of the true metal" was missing. He began to suspect that her softness of manner was more than half assumed, for could she have spoken so bitterly to the friendless and dependent Alma had she possessed that truly womanly tenderness which shrinks from inflicting pain?

Meanwhile the carriage had quitted the grounds appertaining to the Clintons, and was rolling down the dusty road that led to Marford Hall. Myriads of silver stars glittered in the sky, the tree-tops rustled as the west wind sighed amid their branches, the moon sailed in placid majesty through the cloudless expanse. Rosamond's heart began to quicken its pulsations. The lodge-gates were reached; they traversed the long avenue of chestnuts; she almost fancied she could discern the tall figure of Cuthbert in the distance. But the faintest

trace of agitation in her manner, a hasty word, a look, might arouse suspicion and defeat her object.

Rosamond was far too prudent a maiden not to fear the breath of slander; she knew that many a fair name has been destroyed by rumors first circulated in the servants' hall. With her accustomed air of cold dignity she descended from the carriage, and made a movement as if about to enter the house, then paused with pretended indecision.

"I will remain for a few minutes on the terrace," she remarked; "it is cooler there than in the house."

No sooner had the domestics retired, and the coachman turned his horses toward the stable, than she sped toward the trysting-place with light footsteps that scarcely brushed the dew from the grass. As she hurried forward she took off the white-plumed hat she was wearing, and drew around her head and shoulders her black lace mantilla, the better to elude observation. Bright and piquant she appeared in this Spanish-like array, so Cuthbert thought, as he hastened to meet her, with many protestations of gratitude for her condescension.

"I must not stay long," she murmured, almost breathless with her rapid walk, meanwhile permitting him to encircle her waist with his arm and lead her into a more secluded part of the park. "I am very foolish to comply with your request. Only imagine the anger of my father and Mr. Clinton if they but knew that we were here together!"

"You will not grudge me a few minutes' happiness," he returned, sentimentally. "Mr. Clinton has been in your society all day, gazing unrebuked into your lustrous eyes, basking in your smiles. And yet, dear Rosamond, he may be unworthy of that great happiness."

"Not more unworthy than the rest of mankind, yourself included," she replied, lightly.

"We cannot tell. There may be a secret connected with Oswald Clinton's early life, that might cause him to sink in the estimation of all honorable men if it were blazoned abroad. Tell me, Rosamond, would your father consider you were bound to fulfill the engagement with your betrothed if I proved him to be a villain?"

"Of course not," she answered, wonderingly. "Cuthbert, you excite my curiosity; I long to hear what you suspect or know."

"At present I had rather not enter into any explanation. I want you to make a solemn promise. If I can satisfy you beyond a doubt that a shadow rests on his name, rendering him undeserving your hand, will you deign to reward a love that saves you from making a sacrifice?"

He flung himself on his knees before her with such a good pretense of passionate devo-



tion, that she might be excused for believing in its reality.

"You will consent to be my wife, sweet Rosamond; to immolate ambition on the shrine of love; to forsake a man whose highest honor is his good name, which I will drag into the dust?"

Long and tenderly he pleaded until the coquettish heart of Rosamond was stirred, and she agreed, conditionally, to descend from her high estate and become the poor artist's bride.

"But remember, Cuthbert, it will only be in case your cruel innuendoes a reproved correct. It is a solemn thing to break a betrothal, except on just grounds, and I would not treat Oswald dishonorably, even to secure my own happiness."

She gave a little sigh, which Mr. Grantley interpreted in his favor, though she was thinking at the moment how disappointing it would be to resign Eaglehurst. Rising from his suppliant position, he clasped in his arms the woman who was the affianced wife of another, and pressed upon her lips a seal of the promise she had given.

"I must not stay longer," said Rosamond, startled at finding herself half-pledged to give up the brilliant matrimonial prospect which had afforded her father so much gratification, and almost doubting whether she was wise in accepting a lot so far inferior. "And Cuthbert, do not triumph too soon. I cannot help feeling confident that Oswald will be able to rebut any calumny leveled against him."

It was a cold farewell, and Cuthbert walked away with an angry feeling, leaving Rosamond to pursue her way homeward alone. He leaped the fence which divided the lawn from the public road, drew forth and lighted a cigar, then sauntered on humming a tune, and meditating on the reform he would work in his future bride's manners and disposition when he was once her legal master.

The nature of these reflections was so soothing that he did not perceive the approach of a shabbily-dressed woman, with a thin red visage and eyes of a watery brightness, who on her side was quite willing to glide past him unobserved had he not suddenly looked up and recognized her.

"What! you hero, Mrs. Rayner, in spite of my warning and your own promise?" he said, angrily, knitting his brows into a frown.

The woman dropped a courtesy, and seemed embarrassed.

"Did I not command you to shun this place?" he continued, sternly. "The night you were sheltered at The Rosery, and I overheard your confession, I gave you timely notice that if you remained in the neighborhood I would give you up to the authorities for the robbery and the murder of the girl whose name and antece-

dents I have made it my business since to ascertain."

"I know you threatened and wheedled until you had wormed out all you wanted," she answered, doggedly. "I wish I had held my tongue, and dared you do your worst."

"I scarcely think you mean what you say, unless you are so tired of life as to wish for an ignominious and violent death. Certainly a woman should avoid the least risk of incurring such a doom."

"I did not kill her; I told you so before," murmured Judith, trembling in every limb.

Cuthbert laughed, and shrugged his shoulders.

"It might be difficult to persuade a jury to believe that statement. Your own confession, written and signed, as you may remember, at my request, is perfectly condemnatory. The girl's property was taken into your own possession, and you led her away from the cottage, where she expected to find a night's lodging, down to the river's brink. Her body is next discovered in the water, a bruise upon the forehead, so I have been told, and who can say whether received before or after death?"

"I give you my word, Mr. Grantley—"

"Pray spare yourself the trouble. I draw my own conclusions, as a sensible man should."

"Why did you make me tell you the whole story, and write that paper?" she asked, savagely. "It was no business of yours."

"Perhaps mine is a morbid taste which revels in the horrible; but at least I rewarded you handsomely for your trouble."

"I know you gave me money, but it was soon gone. I want some badly now; times are hard, and one must live."

"Not here, in the very place I advised you to shun. Be off by the next train, and dwell elsewhere in security."

"Don't be down on me so sharply, Mr. Grantley," she whined. "I am getting old and weak, and people won't give me work."

"They find your character will not bear inspection, and prefer employing the services of individuals whose experiences are less varied than yours. Besides, I cannot imagine why you should expect any improvement to take place in your circumstances through coming here."

Judith hesitated.

"It was not exactly that," she began. "I wanted to see my daughter Alma."

"Oh, indeed!" He fixed his glittering eyes upon her, while a smile, sardonic and full of meaning, played over his features. "What exquisite maternal feelings you possess, Mrs. Rayner," he continued, after a pause; "but really, I am afraid you are apt to make mistakes."

"I don't understand you," she stammered.

"Possibly not. I will make my meaning



clearer. You had a more important motive for coming to this village than that of paying a visit to your beloved child."

"If I had, it is not your business," said Judith, defiantly.

"You have said that before. Let me tell you that such impertinent speeches damage your cause. If once I should condescend to become your active enemy, you would regret that you had not treated me with some civility."

"I am not staying here for any bad purpose," she said, after a moment's consideration. "I may as well tell you the truth."

"It would certainly show your wisdom."

"Well, then, you remember that I owned having hid away the black bag she was carrying when I met her in the hollow of the blasted oak, that I was afraid to sell her trinkets lest curious folks might wonder how they come into my hands, and so just left them as they were."

"No doubt you reflected that it would give rise to awkward questions if a woman in your position offered articles of jewelry for sale soon after the body of a young lady had been found in the river under suspicious circumstances."

"Right you are, Mr. Grantley; I'll not deceive you. My old man he used to say my head was set the right way on my shoulders; he meant that I was no fool. Now money tells no tales, unless it's marked, which is a mean thing to do, and taking a shabby advantage of a fellow-creature, so I took that and left the rest."

"I have heard all this before; you have something more to tell me."

"Well, I was thinking that I am miserably poor and getting on in years, and that same swag must be lying there still."

Cuthbert became rather pale. Did he feel that there was some resemblance between this miserable outcast and himself?—that both had touched forbidden fruit? She was in his power, he could not be said to fear her, yet the gentleman by birth could not but confess his degradation.

"I guess your meaning and advise you to dismiss the subject from your mind," he said, hurriedly. "It would be madness to run the slightest risk. Besides, I forbid it, and insist upon your leaving Marford by the next train which starts for whatever place you have lately left. Here is money, a couple of sovereigns, which I give merely from compassion for your friendless condition; make them last as long as you can. Remember how easily I could put the police on your track, and hunt you down to a shameful death. Judith Rayner, if you are wise you will not disobey me."

The woman's sullen face lighted up with a

gleam of intelligence as the torrent of words poured forth. Cuthbert's change of manner did not escape her observation, though she made no comment.

"Well, if I must, I must," she said, closing her eager palm over the money.

"And do not forget that I am your friend only as long as you are amenable to my wishes," observed Cuthbert, as he pursued his way.

## CHAPTER VII.

### IN THE GALLERY.

AUTUMN was stealing on apace. Already a certain coolness in the air at early morning or when evening dews were falling presaged a not far distant period when open windows and light clothing must be abandoned for fires and furs.

It had been raining fast for many hours. The trees at Eaglehurst drooped their heads, overladen with moisture, and night was fast enveloping in her vapory gray vail the turrets of the ancient mansion.

Oswald Clinton was in the gallery, a long, oak-paneled room with heraldic designs artistically emblazoned on its ceiling.

To this room he often resorted. He was a dreamer, and found pleasure in associating with the portraits of his ancestors. Yet, as he paced to and fro, sometimes gazing on the relics he valued, but oftener in deep thought, the shades of his ancestors seemed to gather round him, approaching him as a degenerate son, who would stain the honor of their house. Then would he inwardly vow to keep stanch in his troth, since an honorable man's word once given should never be lightly retracted. And if a vision rose before him of sweet, child-like features, framed in golden tresses, he deemed it a delusion and snare which tempted him to dishonor.

He heard the wind moaning, the rain dashing against the windows. Nature was gloomy and in unison with his thoughts; the beams of a rising moon, the wild radiance of unnumbered stars, would have ill-suited his present feelings.

He heeded not the flight of time. He was battling against the impulses of his heart, pleading and defending his own cause, occasionally enjoying a gleam of triumph, often utterly abased.

The hours crept on unmarked, until gradually he grew weary even of thinking, and, stretching himself on the low window seat, ostensibly for the purpose of gazing out into the dark and dismal night, fell into a light slumber.

His dreams repeated in a distorted form the substance of his reflections.

Rosamond appeared in bridal attire, and



with a bewitching smile offered him her hand. Yet when he approached, she slyly unsheathed a dagger carried in her girdle, and would have plunged it to his heart had not a veiled figure interposed.

Then his guardian angel—for so he termed her—snatched away the mask Rosamond had always worn, and showed her real visage, so frowning, crafty, and ill-favored, that he turned away shuddering.

And the angel dropped her vail, and turned out to be only a woman, after all; but a woman tender, gracious, and faithful, whose countenance beamed with purest love, and wore the lineaments of Alma.

Oswald awoke with a start. The few wax tapers that lighted the room were beginning to dwindle in their sockets, and the large clock in the hall was solemnly tolling midnight.

They kept early hours at Eaglehurst. Doubtless all the household, save the master, had retired to their several chambers long ago.

He stretched himself, yawning, and was prepared to follow their example, when a bright streak of light pouring through a crevice in the door, attracted his attention.

Who could be moving about the house so late? The rooms generally occupied by the family were situated in another part of the building. Indeed, since the death of Mr. Guy Clinton and his wife, many apartments in the east wing were dismantled and unused. Perhaps it was because the gallery was quiet and secluded, not likely to be traversed by disturbing footsteps, that Oswald so often resorted thither when he was in the mood for solitude.

The light grew still brighter. He started from his recumbent posture, and glanced around, thinking of burglars and midnight assassins.

The heavy portal swung slowly open. But no forbidding form appeared upon the threshold, no brutal visage peered in, intent on deeds of violence.

Instead, a graceful girl, carrying a small silver lamp in her hand, who came noiselessly toward him, dressed as he had seen her in the earlier part of the evening in floating robes of the palest blue, with a few white flowers (now withering fast away) in her golden hair.

"Alma!" he said, in surprise, the name with which he was familiar in his thoughts escaping his lips in the momentary embarrassment.

"Mr. Oswald!"

She looked dazed, bewildered, and stood transfixed before him.

A bright idea relieved his perplexity. She was unknowingly, perhaps, a somnambulist, and in that strange, half-trance-like condition had wandered through corridors and deserted rooms until she had penetrated to the gallery. He remembered that it was considered danger-

ous to awake suddenly persons in such a state, and began already to feel pangs of self-reproach at his inadvertence. "Suppose she should sustain either physical or mental injury through fright occasioned by his stupid exclamation? How great would be his remorse! Not only had the girl's beauty and amiability entranced him, but she reminded him—oh, how forcibly!—of another whom he had loved in his early youth and never forgotten.

His voice almost trembled as he addressed Alma.

"Do not be alarmed, Miss Grantley. You must forgive me if I startled you. I did not know you walked in your sleep."

There was a shy, upward glance of gratitude—a sigh heaved almost of relief.

"Have you ever before found yourself acting the part of a somnambulist?" he inquired, smilingly, with the intention of dispelling her evident uneasiness.

She shook her head gravely.

"After all, it was as well that I disturbed you. If not, you might have passed through that door on the left, the only outlet except the one by which you have just entered, and awoke to find yourself in a long, dark passage, where I venture to say you have never yet been, since it only leads to a few uninhabited rooms. You would scarcely know how to find your way back again."

"Oh, I should have known," she said, shivering.

"You are cold! How thoughtless I am to detain you here! I trust you will be able to sleep more peacefully now, Miss Grantley, and have pleasant dreams."

He held open the door to allow her to pass through, when by some mischance a button of his coat caught in the long trailing love lock which hung over her shoulder. As he disengaged it, a sudden impulse of passionate love swept down the barrier of self-control by which he had been hitherto bound. He raised the silken tress to his lips. While Alma, whose cheeks had flooded with a crimson glow, vainly attempted remonstrance, the words dying away unuttered.

A loud discordant voice at the doorway startled them both.

"You see, madame, I was right. I did not accuse Miss Grantley without reason."

It was Lavinia Varley who spoke; her gaunt form drawn to its utmost height, her small eyes twinkling with indignation. Behind her, gray and grim, stood old Mrs. Clinton, wrapped in a faded dressing-gown of rich brocade, and bristling with suppressed resentment.

"Oswald, is it possible you can condescend to hold stolen interviews with a mere dependant, thus wronging the noble lady so soon to be your wife?" she said, in an awful tone.

"I wrong no one, grandmother, although



you grossly misjudge *me*. As you have discovered so much, with Miss Grantley's permission, I will tell the truth. The young lady happens to be a somnambulist, and in a state of unconsciousness made her way to this room, when she was awoken by my sudden exclamation."

"A very likely story," remarked the lady, with ineffable scorn.

"A story which, I presume, no one will venture to doubt when I pledge my word of honor as a gentleman and a Clinton that it is perfectly correct."

"Unfortunately, Oswald," remarked Mrs. Clinton, significantly, "you taught us years ago to distrust your word."

"Poor, poor Any!" sighed Lavinia, under her breath.

The color rose hotly to Oswald's dark cheek.

"As you are a lady and near relation, I must not resent your speech; a man would meet with different treatment!"

"Indeed—indeed, Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Varley," said the trembling Alma, "I never thought of coming here to meet Mr. Oswald; I never dreamt that he—"

She paused, overcome with confusion.

"It will serve no purpose to remain here longer," observed the old lady, severely. "After this unfortunate disclosure Miss Grantley will doubtless see the propriety of relinquishing her position in this house."

"Yes, I must go away; I can stop here no longer," began Alma. Then checking herself and bursting into an agony of tears, she exclaimed: "How cruel you are! What can I do? What will become of me?"

The sight of her tears was agonizing to Oswald.

"Listen, grandmother!" he cried, impetuously. "I swear Miss Grantley is innocent of all imprudence, to call it by no harsher name. She will continue to reside here as my sister's companion so long as such residence may be convenient and agreeable to them both. And while I am master of Eaglehurst, no word shall be raised against her."

"You are quite chivalrous, Oswald," sneered the old lady.

She did not venture to say more, for she saw his spirit was thoroughly roused, and had a timely remembrance that his sway over the whole domain was unlimited. If she provoked him beyond sufferance she might be requested to take her departure.

"Let us dwell no longer on this painful theme," he resumed, more gently. "Upon reflection you will regret having misjudged Miss Grantley, and I must request that no hint of this business is suffered to reach Maul's ears."

"You may be sure of that," returned the old lady, in a tone implying that her granddaughter's morals would receive no contamination through her imprudence. "Nor shall I mention the subject to Miss Marford," she added, magnanimously.

"Were I the person alone in question you would be at liberty to use your own discretion; but silence will undoubtedly be more agreeable to Miss Grantley. And now, ladies, it is growing late; may I advise you to retire?"

As they retreated in obedience to his request, he managed to whisper to Alma, "Miss Grantley, can you forgive my folly?"

Without answering, she hastened after the elder ladies. Mrs. Lavinia was muttering to her mistress, "They may say what they like, but I shall always doubt them. A silly, headstrong girl, after all my warnings! And, madam, did you notice when we first surprised them, he was actually kissing her hair."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A RELIC OF THE PAST.

ALMA has grown pale and silent. Her dark eyes look larger than usual, because her cheeks are growing hollow. Her pleasant energy has been superseded by profound depression, and although she daily struggles to resume her former demeanor, a less keen observer than Mr. Oswald Clinton would doubt her forced gayety, and more than suspect the effort it costs her.

But Oswald strives, though unsuccessfully, to dismiss thoughts which bear a sting. He is to be married almost immediately. Mr. Marford has expressed his opinion that there is no just reason why the marriage should be deferred longer; Rosamond has consented with nonchalant grace; there will be ample time for the bridal tour and return to Eaglehurst to take place before Christmas. Everything is arranged on a grand scale befitting the wealth of the happy pair. The number of bridesmaids, carriages, and triumphal arches is freely discussed throughout the village. The bride's trousseau is reported to be valued at a fabulous sum, while maid and matron rejoice at the anticipated glorious spectacle of shimmering silks, rich laces, and splendid jewelry which shall gladden their eyes on the momentous morning when the Hon. Edward Marford's heiress shall contract an alliance worthy of her position in society.

These gorgeous preparations, however, do not appear to yield any peculiar gratification to the parties most concerned. Rosamond is often peevish and unreasonable; her betrothed can scarcely be considered an ardent lover. Sometimes he finds himself watching Alma with an earnestness which causes him to be



watched in his turn by grandmother Clinton and her faithful attendant, if they happen to be present. But he avoids all opportunity of being alone in the girl's society, for her sake as well as his own.

Maud, an unconcerned spectator of what may be called the acted enigma being played before her eyes, by turns wonders at Alma's headaches and Oswald's gloom, without connecting with either the approaching marriage, to which she looks forward with deep interest. Why should she not? It is a well-known fact that a bridemaid's dress of white and delicate pink is becoming to dark-haired young ladies who can boast of a good complexion; and young Mr. Roslyn has said—but it matters little what he has said, though it was enough to occupy Maud's most anxious thoughts, and render her rather oblivious of her friend.

"Do you know, Alma," she began, one evening, after having remained absorbed in reflection on the inexhaustible subject for nearly five minutes, "that I have a most opportune remembrance? I want to look my very best at the ball Mr. Marford gives in honor of Rosamond's wedding, and just now I recollected that there are all sorts of pretty things kept in that old ebony cabinet in the 'amber-room.' One of my uncles was fond of collecting foreign curiosities, and I might discover an elaborately-carved Indian fan, or some antique ornament which, owing to its very age, would be a novelty."

"We had better explore at once," answered Alma, rousing herself to interest.

"Oh, I dare not. My cold is so troublesome, and grandma desired me to keep my room. I don't feel certain that I should obey the old lady's injunction," she added, with a pretty grimace, "if I were not afraid of looking a fright on the important day. You know an influenza gives one a red nose, and eyelids which are so extremely unbecoming."

This truth could not be gainsayed, and once more silence fell upon the pair.

"Alma, darling," said Maud, suddenly reopening the subject with fresh energy, "I really have not sufficient patience to wait until to-morrow. No doubt one of these keys will fit the lock of the cabinet. You may open it yourself, and bring me an accurate description of its contents."

Alma obediently took her way to the amber-room, a comparatively small apartment separated from the vast drawing-rooms by a curtain of satin, golden in hue. The cabinet stood in a corner, a quaint, old-fashioned article of furniture, inlaid with choice bits of delicate Dresden ware. The doors were locked; but Alma applied her keys successfully, and was soon rewarded by being enabled to bring long-hidden treasures to light,

Card-cases of sandal-wood and an ivory fan; amulets worn by the superstitious in Eastern lands, to guard their owner against the evil eye; a withered bouquet, tied with faded ribbon; Hindoo idols of intense ugliness, a silver bangle, and an exquisitely-finished pencil-drawing of a young girl.

The latter arrested Alma's attention. The original had evidently been beautiful, since, without the aid of colors, the artist was able to impress the gazer with a sense of her superlative loveliness. Graceful form and delicately-chiseled features, luxuriant hair wound in heavy braids around a shapely head, and a tiny foot displaying its attractions beneath the folds of a simple working dress. For this was the resemblance of no aristocratic maiden, unless she was masquerading for a jest. Not only was she clad in rustic garb, but was represented as being engaged in the homely task of feeding a brood of chickens that thronged round her, eager for the grain she smilingly threw to them.

As Alma viewed these details with interest, wondering if it were a fancy sketch, or how it happened that this fair girl's likeness was so carefully preserved at Eaglehurst, her looks fell upon the initials "O. C." roughly scrawled in one corner.

The sight gave her a kind of shock.

Was this another proof of Oswald Clinton's acquaintance with Lavinia Varley's niece? Was it vain to hope that he had been misjudged and libeled by those who forgot that appearances are sometimes against the innocent? Supposing this was Amy's portrait, and he had loved her!

She stopped, as a shadow fell upon the paper over which she bent. Oswald stood gravely looking down upon her.

"Miss Grantley, are you criticising that old drawing of mine? I thought it was destroyed years ago."

"I admire it," she murmured, with downcast eyes; "and the girl is very beautiful."

"Indeed! I thought so when I saw her first, feeding the chickens near her father's door. The scene became impressed upon my mind; I could not rest until I had reproduced it."

"I do not wonder," she answered.

Then, feeling it was a foolish remark to make, blushed vividly, for Oswald's look was still resting on her face.

"Do you know, Miss Grantley, I sometimes fancy I can see a strong resemblance between your features and hers?"—pointing to the drawing.

"You flatter me, Mr. Clinton."

"Many ladies would feel offended rather than flattered; for Amy was but the daughter of the district schoolmaster, and after his death became my mother's maid. But to me she



was the embodiment of my most romantic dreams. You must remember, Miss Grantley, twenty years have passed since then. I was a mere youth when that fair face first disturbed my peace."

"You loved her, then?"

The words half choked her, but she resolved they should be spoken.

"Deeply—passionately," he replied.

"Alas for man's love!" she said, in scornful accents, recollecting the story told by her mother concerning the deserted girl's last sad journey and tragical end. "Is it worth the winning, when so soon it vanishes completely, without even leaving the wreck behind?"

"You think it is only possible to love once?" he asked, moodily.

An impetuous answer rose to her lips.

"I think remorse should ever haunt the path of him to whose account can be laid the misery and death of a loving woman!"

"You, too, Miss Grantley?"

The deep reproach in his tone stung her to the quick. Had she, too, enrolled herself amid his enemies?

"I see you judge me harshly," he continued, "too harshly, perhaps, if you knew all; but let the dead rest. I have learned to bear unmoved the scandalous hints which have assailed my honor, yet I am weak enough to wish you had a higher opinion of me. Gross vanity, you see, Miss Grantley."

Her head drooped lower and lower still, until he could not see how pale she was growing.

"My opinion must be valueless to you, Mr. Clinton. I am only a young, inexperienced girl, your sister's companion; you are a man of high position, rich, honored, and the chosen husband of a millionaire's daughter."

"You over-estimate my advantages. I would give them all, such as they are, if I might shake from me the shackles which for years have held me from freedom of action."

"I must leave you," she said, timidly shrinking from further confidences. "Maud will wonder what detains me."

She began to replace hastily in the cabinet its scattered treasures.

"You are not well," cried her companion, seeing how pale she was. "The room is close. Let me open the window to give you air."

He drew aside the curtain.

A deep red light was in the sky, which even as he gazed increased in intensity, and spread out fan-like from one particular point.

"A fire!" he cried, throwing up the window. "It cannot be far from Eaglehurst!"

A shower of vivid sparks shooting up into the air, and rising clouds of smoke, apparently at no great distance, confirmed his apprehensions.

"I must hurry off, and make myself useful. I fear our pretty little ivy-clad church, St. Monica, is falling a prey to the flames."

"Must you go?" she asked, with a thrill of fear, for there might be danger, and he, she knew, was reckless and daring.

"You would not have me stay away if I could be of service; and you are better now," he said, almost tenderly, looking down on the fair visage now flushed with excitement. "Farewell, Miss Grantley! You must wish us all success in speedily extinguishing the conflagration."

And he withdrew to issue the necessary orders for dispatching the engine, which, as a matter of precaution, was kept at Eaglehurst, thinking it might give efficient assistance to the small fire brigade, numbering scarcely a dozen men, which was all Marford could boast.

Next morning the pleasing intelligence of St. Monica's escape from any irreparable injury gave universal satisfaction throughout the village.

The fire originated in the vestry adjoining the church (how, no one could say); but, mainly owing to Mr. Oswald Clinton's exertions, and the large rewards offered to such members of the brigade who might best succeed in arresting the progress of the flames, they were effectually checked before the sacred edifice had sustained much damage.

One great misfortune, however, had happened. The large oaken chest full of parish registers was destroyed with its contents. Indeed, the fire appeared to have raged most fiercely at that part of the building, and the records interesting to so many were consumed, leaving but a few charred fragments behind.

## CHAPTER IX.

### APPEARANCES ARE AGAINST HIM.

It was the morning before the appointed wedding-day. The Hon. Mr. Marford had ridden over early to Eaglehurst to make a few final arrangements with Oswald Clinton, and now business matters having been concluded in the study, was paying his respects to the ladies of the family in their morning-room.

He was a tall, upright man, nearly sixty years of age, with lint-white hair and moustache, a supercilious smile, and an expression of unbounded pride resting on his thin, compressed lips, and in his cold blue eyes. He dressed in the latest fashion, suitably adapted to his years, and though haughty and uncompromising in his behavior to those whom he considered his inferiors, was not wanting in affability toward such superior beings as he hailed as his equals.

He was now seated near Mrs. Clinton, who



reclined in her favorite arm-chair, with Mrs. Lavinia in close attendance, according to usual custom.

"You were kind enough to inquire after my daughter," he said, in his full, pompous tones, courteously raised in consideration of the old lady's deafness. "I have not seen her this morning, but she was in good health yesterday evening. A little flurried and nervous, as we might expect her to be, Mrs. Clinton, at this critical period of her fate, but looking charmingly well, notwithstanding."

"If only my son Guy could have lived to see the day which will ally the two families!" observed the old lady, in her thin, tremulous voice.

"I have reason to believe it would have been gratifying to his feelings," agreed the honorable, sensible that such a marriage should delight any reasonable parent. "Persons in our position," he continued, swelling with conscious pride, "have a great responsibility thrust upon them. We must mate our children with those who are suitable in birth, social status—nay, even the worldly wealth a noble mind is apt to despise. My daughter, for instance, could not wed beneath her! She—"

The remaining portion of Mr. Marford's speech was doomed never to enlighten the intellects of those to whom it was addressed. A servant entered, looking decidedly flurried and uncomfortable.

"A lady wishes to see Mr. Marford."

The man was thrust aside, and Mrs. Hill, with tear-stained cheeks and quivering lips, her bonnet put on awry, her shawl half dragging on the ground, made her way into the room, and without any conventional greeting to those assembled, addressed herself to Mr. Marford:

"Oh, Mr. Marford, you will never forgive me, but indeed it is not my fault. Who could have foreseen this calamity?"

"Please to calm yourself, madam," returned he, sternly regarding his daughter's chaperon as she stood there wringing her hands and applying her handkerchief to her swollen eyes. "I should be glad to hear your explanation of the reason we are favored with this visit?"

"Oh, Mr. Marford, I am irretrievably ruined. No one will trust me with the charge of their daughters, though I have always had the highest recommendations, and been most conscientious in fulfilling my duties."

"Cannot you speak, woman?" he cried, surprised out of his aristocratic languor. "Has any harm happened to Rosamond?"

"The worst of all possible harms. She has eloped; by this time she is married!"

Consternation was portrayed on every countenance, with the exception of Oswald's, which wore an indefinable air of relief.

"My daughter married? Mrs. Hill must surely be mistaken."

"Indeed, sir, my news is only too correct. Last night, Miss Rosamond desired not to be disturbed until a late hour this morning. Her head ached, she said, and a long night's rest might do her good. But when her maid entered the apartment at the hour appointed, she found it vacant, and this open note on the table."

Mr. Marford almost snatched the paper from the lady's hands, anxiety concerning his child in all due causing forgetfulness and politeness.

"What does she mean?" he asked, glancing over the contents. "'Can give good reasons for refusing to marry Oswald; must open my eyes to his baseness, trusting I shall then approve her wiser choice.' I do not think she will find me so easily conciliated. Can you tell me, madam," he cried, turning fiercely to the hapless chaperon who cowed beneath his glance, "the name of this fellow whom you have allowed to carry off my daughter?"

"He is a talented young man, and comes of a respectable family," she answered, deprecatingly. "If what Marie tells me is true (the girl should have spoken before, but feared to give offense) it seems highly probable that Miss Rosamond has eloped with her drawing-master."

The Hon. Mr. Marford's wrathful expression was fearful to behold. His son-in-law, a penniless artist, a poor teacher glad to go from house to house giving lessons in order to gain his livelihood!

There was the sound of voices in the hall, evidently a fresh arrival, though all were too much agitated to notice anything unusual. Once more the door opened to admit Mr. Cuthbert Grantley and his newly-made bride.

They came into the room, she rather leading her husband than being herself conducted, her eyes flashing with excitement, the rose upon her cheek deepened to an almost unbecoming glow. With a disdainful gesture she swept past Oswald, upon whom she bestowed a glance of supreme indignation.

"Papa, I have come here with my husband, Mr. Cuthbert Grantley, that we may at once enter into an explanation which will satisfy you that under no circumstances could I have consented to the marriage you have arranged for me with Mr. Oswald Clinton."

Mr. Marford was beginning to storm, but Oswald laid his hand upon his arm.

"Sir, as a personal favor, may I entreat you to listen to your daughter?"

"You will soon be yourself in the position of defendant, Mr. Clinton," she answered, with a spiteful glance. "I am about to show my father how cruelly he has been deceived in his estimation of your character. Had it not been for the affection I happily inspired," turning toward Cuthbert, "I might never have known



you truly, and should have found myself united in marriage to a villain."

"That is a harsh term, Rosamond," remarked Oswald, unmoved at the angry lady's vehemence.

"I will not retract it. Father, I appeal to you, may not that term be justly used to a man who secretly marries and disowns a simple country girl, because her station is not equal to his own, and he fears to incur the anger of his relatives?"

"Bad, very bad!" muttered her father, perplexed, and stroking his white mustache.

"But worse remains. The unlucky girl returning to claim her just rights disappears nearly at the gates of Eaglehurst, and her body is found floating in the river."

"But what has this terrible story to do with Oswald Clinton?" asked Mr. Marford, sternly.

"Simply this. The girl was his wife, legally married to him nearly nineteen years ago at the church of St. Monica, which recently so narrowly escaped destruction by fire."

"How have you discovered all this?" demanded her father, sharply.

"By a strange chance," remarked Cuthbert, modestly, "the certificate of the marriage came into my possession. You can see, sir, by glancing over this document, that we advance nothing but the truth."

"Hum! Certificate of marriage between Oswald Clinton, bachelor, and Amy Lavinia Monro, spinster. This looks authentic. What have you to say, Oswald?"

"I deny ever having gone through the ceremony of marriage with the lady in question, but can give no further explanation."

"You disbelieve the evidence of your own senses perhaps," cried Mr. Marford, handing him the paper, yellow and discolored with age.

"Or do you assert this to be a forgery?"

"It is genuine," replied the younger man, after an apparently careful examination. "If it has been tampered with, the guilt is not mine."

"What do you imply, sir?" said Cuthbert, attempting to assume an air of indignation, but looking pale and anxious. "Mr. Marford can easily satisfy any doubts he may entertain by searching the registers."

"Which were destroyed three nights ago," remarked Oswald Clinton, gravely. "You have a bad memory, Mr. Grantley."

"At least, papa," interrupted Rosamond, "you have heard enough to convince you that I have acted wisely in declining Mr. Clinton's hand, and uniting my fate to that of a gentleman who, though his inferior in wealth, bears an unblemished name."

"I know not what to think," stammered her father. "Oswald, why were you not more candid? Had I known you were a widower,

the knowledge would have been no insuperable objection to your union with my daughter; nor do I imagine she would herself have regarded it as an obstacle. But we both detest mysteries."

"Papa, I would never wed a man whose deserted wife had died under such very peculiar circumstances!" cried Rosamond, significantly.

"You are indeed wild in your accusations," interrupted Oswald. "No tittle of evidence supports your serious allegation; no witness could be brought forward to speak a criminating word."

"I would appear against you!" exclaimed Lavinia Varley, thrusting herself forward, and grasping his arm.

She was almost maddened by strong excitement, her eyes dilated, her thin face worked in agitation.

"I always felt sure in my own mind that you were guilty of my beautiful Amy's death," she went on. "But there was no one to give me advice, and what could one poor old woman do to obtain justice? You were out the very night she was drowned, wandering no one knew whither, though the snow was deep and the bitter wind must have frozen you to the bone. When you returned your air was preoccupied, your countenance gloomy, your clothes saturated, for which you accounted by saying that you had inadvertently stepped into a high snow-drift. Nor is this all. Your own man, James Hardy—dead and gone many years now, poor fellow!—told me as a great secret that he had found in your room a letter which curiosity prompted him to read."

"And that letter?" cried Rosamond.

"Contained only a few lines, signed 'Amy,' entreating Oswald to meet the writer at the west gate of Eaglehurst."

"I see that I am tried and condemned already," remarked Oswald, with rather a sickly smile. "Even Maud, my little sister, shrinks horror-stricken from that monster of iniquity she has the misfortune to call brother. If I admit the truth of all Mrs. Varley now alleges publicly for the first time, but emphatically deny that on that night I met her niece, for whom I vainly waited until long past the appointed hour, is there one present who will believe me?"

"I will—I do!" cried the girlish, trembling voice of Alma. "Mr. Clinton, I can prove you are innocent of causing your wife's death, that you never saw her on that terrible evening. Only wait—wait until I bid you follow me!"

Quickly she glided from the room, leaving the party assembled almost spellbound by her sudden speech and movement.

Mr. Marford began to consider whether the



grave charges brought against Oswald Clinton would not lead to an open scandal, if not worse; Maud wept copiously; the two older ladies looked grave and grim; Cuthbert felt uneasy. What course was Alma about to pursue? Surely a sense of filial duty, combined with regard for her own interest, would prevent her divulging Judith Raynor's confession? Yet, after all, it mattered little to him: his wealthy bride was won. The marriage certificate found in the mildewed and rotten valise, so many years concealed in the hollow of the blasted oak, had proved a trump card in his hand. Skillfully rousing Rosamond's resentment by expressing exaggerated horror of Oswald's treachery, he then, by a judicious mixture of persuasion and reasoning, induced her to leave her father's house, and be married by special license at the neighboring town. Perhaps he was scarcely prepared for the strong measures upon which the young lady insisted immediately after the completion of the ceremony; namely, that they should proceed at once to Eaglehurst and expose her intended bridegroom to Mr. Marford, she being aware of the hour fixed for that gentleman's intended visit.

Rosamond's impetuosity, however, bore down all the scruples he ventured to suggest, so now it was necessary to brave the dangers of this stormy interview, consoled by the reflection that he had secured the heiress, and for her sake a father would not inquire too closely into the means his son-in-law had employed to obtain his startling intelligence concerning the master of Eaglehurst.

Almost entire silence reigned until Alma again appeared, standing in the doorway, and beckoning with her hand as a sign that they should follow where she led the way.

Her light dress fluttered before them as she passed down the wide oak staircase, through the hall and into the gallery. No one wondered more than Oswald whither she was about to lead them, when she opened the side door communicating with the long disused east wing.

Up stairs now, through long corridors, passing the closed doors of many deserted rooms, where the moth feasted upon once rich draperies and velvet piled carpets, while spiders wove their webs from tarnished cornices or painted ceilings—higher still, until they reached an upper story, and Alma gently opened a door at the end of a long gallery.

## CHAPTER X.

### RELEASED.

THE Hon. Mr. Marford and those who accompanied him found themselves in a small chamber, sparsely furnished, yet not devoid of

comfort, for every arrangement showed tender care and thought. A few late autumn flowers, placed in a vase upon the table, shed fragrance in the air; an open Bible lay beside them. The sunshine peeped into the casement, but was not allowed to enter too freely, lest it might disturb the broken slumbers of a worn and haggard woman, who was lying on the neat white bed that stood in one corner of the room.

The woman was Judith Rayner, and she was dying. None who looked upon that hollow cheek, those sharpened features and deeply-sunken eyes, could doubt that the sands of her life were numbered, and that she would soon pass away from a world where she had both sinned and suffered.

Alma advanced and stood beside her.

"This is my mother," she said; "and it is she alone who can clear Mr. Clinton from the foul charge brought against him. Pardon me, my friends, that I have dared to bring her beneath your roof without your knowledge or permission; but she was ill, suffering, and destitute when she sought me out, and entreated me to give her shelter. She conjured me, by a parent's claims, to allow her to remain here for awhile until she grew better, so she said, and was able to quit this part of the country. I yielded weakly—wrongly, perhaps; but I knew she could live concealed in one of the many uninhabited rooms in this wing, of which Maud had often spoken."

"And you were about to visit her when you suddenly appeared at midnight in the galleries, and I believed that you were walking in your sleep?" inquired Oswald. "Why not have told me the truth?"

"I could not," she said, remembering how much she had dreaded a discovery that would reveal to her friends the secret of her parentage, until love, victorious over pride, had, for Oswald's sake, unsealed her lips.

"Why have we been brought here?" demanded Mr. Marford, impatiently. "What can this good woman tell us?"

"Speak, mother!" said Alma, gently. "You have often told me it would ease your mind to confess all you know regarding the death of the drowned girl who rests in St. Monica's churchyard. Let the world learn that no guilt attaches to her husband, Oswald Clinton."

Judith Rayner's worn visage had a puzzled, wondering expression, but gradually lighted up with intelligence.

"You are mistaken, my girl. I was myself at first, then I understood. She was married to Mr. Ashe, Mr. Oswald's cousin."

"Ah!" cried Oswald; "then I may speak at last! For years I have borne calumny, doubts and misrepresentations, for I was fettered by a solemn vow that I would not be the first to



divulge the secret marriage of my cousin to Amy Monro. Now it is a secret no longer, and I am a free man who can silence slander by a frank avowal.

"When I was very young, Amy's beauty won my love. She became to me an ideal being, and upon her I lavished the fresh, warm feelings of an impulsive nature. I was eager to prove my devotion by any act of heroism or self-sacrifice which might elevate me in her estimation.

"Bitter was my disappointment when I discovered that her affections were already engaged. Yet she refused my suit with so much sweetness, such kindly regret, that, far from being disenchanted, I worshiped her more than ever.

"Although I might not hope to be her favored lover, she was willing to accord me her friendship. I was grateful for the boon, and proud of winning her confidence. Boy-like, I gloried in my chains, and rumors of my infatuation for my mother's pretty waiting-maid even reached my father's ears, and were remembered at a future period.

"Guy Clinton was a proud man, rather arbitrary in his notions. I held him in great awe, so did my cousin, who was acting as my tutor at the time, and was entirely dependent on his favor. Oswald Clinton Ashe (his Christian name was the same, as mine) knew his prospects would be blighted if the curacy at Mr. Marford's disposal was not bestowed upon him. He dared not marry Amy openly; the unequal alliance would alienate his friends; but they could be privately united at St. Monica.

"The rector was abroad, the curate in charge happened to be a college friend of my cousin's, so there was little difficulty in arranging the matter with the aid of a special license. By some chance I suspected what was in progress, and they were forced to take me into their confidence. I was implored to keep the secret, and Amy—the girl I still loved so dearly—cast herself at my feet, and, with many tears, entreated me to make a sacred promise that under no circumstances would I be the first to divulge the fact of the marriage.

"Her persuasions were too powerful to be resisted. I loathed deceit, yet pledged myself to a course of action which drew me into a labyrinth of difficulties, from which, till now, I have vainly struggled to free myself.

"When Amy quitted Eaglehurst, I incurred the suspicion of having instigated her flight. My father was furious, and as I could offer no satisfactory answers to his questions, felt convinced that his surmises were well founded. He discovered that I had borrowed from a money-lender a rather large sum at exorbitant interest, and as it was not possible to tell him that it was for my cousin's use, to enable him

to provide a home for his young bride, bitter divisions arose which were never entirely healed.

"A few months passed away, then news arrived from the distant town where Oswald's charge was situated that he had died suddenly of heart disease. His marriage was still unacknowledged, and, until released from my promise, I dared not reveal it. The note of which Lavinia Varley has spoken was my first intimation that Amy intended to return to Marford.

"And now may I ask how the certificate fell into Mr. Grantley's hands, also how the erasure occurred which so conclusively established the general opinion that I was the bridegroom? My cousin, like myself, bore the old family name of Oswald, to which was added Clinton, his mother's maiden appellation, but a narrow inspection of that document would convince the most skeptical that a word had been carefully expunged; Oswald Clinton Ashe would have been the correct signature."

Under his inquiring glance, Cuthbert quailed visibly, and could only murmur a few incoherent speeches. He was still more embarrassed when Judith Rayner, raising her shrill weak voice, accused him of having stolen the valise containing both papers and jewelry which had lain concealed for years in the hollow oak.

Then, pouring forth in disjointed sentences the narrative with which the reader is acquainted, she expressed most bitter animosity against Cuthbert for having menaced her with exposure in order to avail himself of her confession to serve his own purposes.

"He did not think I had read the documents," she added; "but I wanted to know who the lady really might be, and spelt through every word before I put them away. He would have had it all his own way if I had not been sharp enough for that."

Oswald approached Alma, who was still beside the bed, clasping her mother's hand.

"Let me thank you," he said, "for to you I owe the happiness of standing once more among my fellow-men with name unblemished and honor unstained."

He would have taken the slender fingers she pressed so closely to her throbbing heart, but she gently resisted the attempt.

"No, Mr. Clinton. The hand of the convict's daughter must never meet yours in friendly pressure. From henceforth my lot for life is chosen. When my mother needs me no more I shall enter some pious sisterhood if they, knowing my story, will deign to accept my services and companionship. Indeed, madam," she continued, turning to Mrs. Clinton, "I would not have disregarded your wishes by remaining here so long had not this



sacred duty detained me. Day by day I was praying to see an improvement in my mother's condition, which would enable me to take her to some quiet cottage where I might work for her support."

"You must not—shall not leave us!" cried Maud, impulsively, hastening to her friend, and flinging her arms around her. "My darling Alma, think what will become of me without my beloved companion!"

"Dear Maud, be comforted. You will have many friends among your equals in social position. Notwithstanding all your kindness, my foolish pride would forbid my being happy here now that you are aware of my unhappy origin. If I could have borne a name that had never known disgrace I should have felt no degradation. Now I should even shrink from your pity, and a harsh or sneering word would break my heart."

"What wretch would dare insult the purest and best of women?" cried Oswald warmly. "Miss Grantley—Alma—before all present, hear me say, if you can accept the heart of a man many years older than yourself, but who can love you even according to your merits, be my wife, and remain at Eaglehurst as its mistress."

The deep, passionate love unconsciously cherished almost since the first day that Alma had been thrown into Oswald's society, long crushed behind barriers she had considered insurmountable, now surged forth. He, so noble, so far removed from other men as to appear almost godlike in pre-eminence, was willing to elevate her to the position of his wife, to give her his name, and a love which should prove capable of creating for her an elysium upon earth.

Might she, dared she accept him?—or was it needful for his sake to cast away the cup of happiness offered to her lips?

While hesitating, she heard Rosamond whisper to her husband, "Who could have imagined that Oswald Clinton in his pique at my rejection would dream of marrying this low-born girl?"

The words stung her into new life. With an air of icy indifference she turned toward her suitor.

Mr. Clinton, I prefer to answer now. I am grateful for the honor you have done me, but no inducement could persuade me to become your wife. If ever I marry (which is most unlikely), my union shall be hallowed by love."

In his excitement he had almost forgotten recent engagement to Rosamond, therefore misconstrued Alma's words as relating merely to her own feelings. Wounded and disappointed he turned away, owning that he had no right to expect a different answer.

There was a short silence, which Judith Rayner was the first to break.

"If you will not have Mr. Oswald for your husband, my girl," she said, "I suppose you do not object to him as a relation? Ask Mr. Grantley there, who tried to take us all in, though he had not wit enough to be successful, whether there was not another document at the bottom of the old black bag?"

"To what do you refer?" asked Oswald eagerly, finding that Cuthbert did not speak.

"I am going to make a clean breast of it," she resumed, "for I shall never get over this bout, and it is hard to die with a secret only half confessed. This girl here is none of mine, though I said she was for more reasons than one. Her mother was the lady that was drowned."

She paused, seemingly faint and exhausted. Restoratives were hastily procured and administered, until she was able to continue.

"This girl was a baby of a few weeks old, lying fast asleep in her mother's arms, carefully wrapped up in flannels and furs, until you could barely see the little pink face that nestled into her bosom. The lady was very old and weary; she did not refuse to let me carry the infant as well as the valise,—even such light burdens were beyond her strength, poor delicate thing! So, when all was over—you know what I mean—I found there was a child to be disposed of, or else left on my hands for good. Many in my shoes would have thrown the child after the mother, but I had a fancy to keep the baby, and Mr. Grantley, if he likes, can vouch for the truth of what I say—that there was a certificate of her birth, as well as one of her mother's marriage, in the valise of which he robbed me."

"I found nothing relating to Alma," said Cuthbert, upon whom all eyes instinctively turned. "A child appears to have been born of the marriage, but her name—"

"Was not Alma," interrupted Mrs. Rayner. "I know that. She had a long string of names, and Amy was the first. But the things she wore were marked 'A L M A.' You may call her Amy Ashe or Alma Grantley, whichever you like best. I don't suppose it much matters."

"Why, only to think," cried Miss Lavinia, rushing to her newly found niece and almost smothering her with kisses, "that this is Amy's child, and dear Amy, after all, was married to that good young man, Mr. Ashe! Though perhaps," she continued, recollecting herself, "it was rather sly of him to mislead me by giving such advice and so many warnings about Mr. Oswald, who I hope will forgive me for having presumed to doubt him."

A slight confusion in the gallery, and the sound of heavy footsteps. Two police officers enter, looking with some surprise at the scene before them, until their eyes rest upon the bridegroom standing beside his bride.



"Very sorry, Mr. Grantley, but you're wanted."

Cuthbert turned pale, but attempted to bluster.

"What is the meaning of this insulting mistake? Whoever has sent you here, my men, shall pay dearly for their audacity."

"Oh, as to that, we have proper instructions, and here is the warrant for your apprehension. You were seen loitering about the premises just before the vestry of St. Monica took fire."

Imagine, if you can, the consternation of the Hon. Mr. Marford and his daughter!

Truly, pride shall have a fall.

Nearly a year has passed away.

Through the exertions of Mr. Marford, who spared neither money nor influence to attain his end, Cuthbert Grantley escaped conviction, and Rosamond's father possessed the poor satisfaction of *pretending* to believe in his son-in-law's innocence when he was consoled with by his friends.

Rosamond, in a stormy interview, overwhelmed Cuthbert with reproaches, insisting upon a judicial separation, as she never wished him to enter her presence again. Cuthbert attempted expostulation, entreaties, even menaces; but the lady was firm. Sundry unpleasant conferences took place, wherein the solicitor of Mr. Marford bore a principal part, and acted so well in his client's interests, that Mr. Grantley was forced to accept a very small compensation for his wounded affections.

It seemed that Rosamond had no absolute control over her fortune until she should attain the age of twenty-five, unless she married according to her father's wishes, therefore Cuthbert had made a sorry bargain. He went abroad with the sum given him, for in Marford his occupation was gone, cold looks and neglect wounded his self-love, and he was thankful to leave a village where his delinquencies were the theme of every tongue.

Rosamond remains in her father's house, worse than widowed, for she has no sweet memories of happy love, only the torturing conviction that she was the dupe of a treacherous fortune hunter. She cannot mix in the world, for her story would follow her and be whispered from ear to ear, until her folly and disgrace became known throughout society, and she is still too proud to endure unmoved such degradation.

Her husband, once loved as much as a shallow heart can be said to feel that passion, is hated now. Sometimes she longs that the tie between them may be broken by his death; then, in an agony of self-abasement, chides her undisciplined heart, and prays for patience.

The future holds little happiness in store for the Hon. Mr. Marford's heiress.

Alma, as she still prefers to be called, although she has assumed her proper surname, has for the past year resided at Eaglehurst, ingratiating herself daily in the affections of the two old ladies, and cherished by Maud as a sister. Great persuasion has been necessary to induce her to remain so long; but Oswald has been traveling abroad, and it was his earnest wish that she should continue to make her home with Maud at least until his return. But now a great change seems imminent. Young Roslyn's admiration for the dark-eyed young mistress of Eaglehurst has expanded into love and a matrimonial proposal, which the young lady demurely accepts, subject of course, to her brother's approval. So two rapturous letters are dispatched to Oswald, at Vienna, which assure him that his presence at home is indispensable, and as fast as trains and ocean steamers can bring him, he returns to the land of his birth.

The harvest moon, large, full and bright, hangs in the sky like a golden luminary, as he drives up the avenue toward Eaglehurst. His thoughts are already with those whom he soon will meet. He wonders what welcome Alma will give him. Even in these few months her heart may have been won, and she be lost to him forever. The very idea causes his features to contract with pain. And yet it is worse than folly to expect that bright young being will view him with feelings warmer than those of mere cousinly regard. Did not the terms in which she couched her refusal preclude hopes that would not be utterly extinguished although he tried to conquer such weakness?

"Surely, at my age, I ought to have more common sense, and realize the fact that I am too gray and grim to inspire love!" he muttered.

They were approaching the house; the flutter of a white dress catches his attention as its owner passes through an open French window and stands upon the terrace. He recognizes Alma, her upturned face etherealized by the moon, which, playing on her golden hair, converts it into an aureole. Oswald springs from the dogcart, and tells the man to drive round to the stables. He will walk the short remaining distance, and steal upon her unawares.

His heart is beating violently as he draws near that beloved presence. He has never before known fear, yet love is fast making him a coward.

"Perhaps," he is thinking, "it will be with aversion that she will gaze upon me, or that cold indifference which is still more hopeless, since it can rarely be overcome."

She turns, and starts as she sees him. A lovely color floods her fair, pale visage; a new-born radiance is kindled in her eyes.



"He was not expected so soon," she says, holding forth her hand in friendly greeting.

The words are nothing; the accent of joyful surprise is all. In a moment—he never knows exactly how it happened—he was pouring forth vows of impassioned love.

Alma's lustrous orbs are coyly cast down; his eloquence cannot win a reply.

"Have I offended you?" at length he says. "Perhaps you deem me presuming and unreasonable? There is a disparity of years between us, and I am doubly aged by anxiety and trouble endured so long while I was bound by a promise to the dead. Besides, you may rightly believe that youth and loveliness like your own deserve the untried affections of a heart which never erected another idol. Now, I have loved your mother."

She would not wait for the completion of his self-depreciating speech. Her bashfulness was conquered by a generous wish to save him further pain.

"And I love you," she murmured. "May I be able to atone for all you have nobly suffered for my mother's sake!"

The moon shone down upon no happier lovers than those upon the terrace at Eaglehurst. His arms were thrown around her, her fair head rested on his breast. The dove had fluttered to its nest at last.

THE END.

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